

# **ENVIRONMENT, NATURAL RESOURCES AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE**

## **Inquiry into the sustainability and operational challenges of Victoria's rural and regional councils**

Melbourne — 12 September 2017

### Members

Mr Josh Bull — Chair

Mr Simon Ramsay — Deputy Chair

Ms Bronwyn Halfpenny

Mr Luke O'Sullivan

Mr Tim Richardson

Mr Richard Riordan

Mr Daniel Young

### Witness

Ms Kate White, director, community resilience and communications, Victoria State Emergency Service.

**The CHAIR** — Welcome to the Environment, Natural Resources and Regional Development Committee’s public hearing in relation to the inquiry into the sustainability and operational challenges of Victoria’s rural and regional councils. All evidence taken today is protected by parliamentary privilege; therefore you are protected for what you say here, but if you go outside and repeat those same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. I welcome Ms Kate White, the director of community resilience and communications at the State Emergency Service. Today’s evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript within the next week. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee’s website. I now ask you to state your name and job title, please.

**Ms WHITE** — Kate White, director of community resilience and communications, Victoria State Emergency Service.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you, Kate. I invite you now to proceed with a brief 5 to 10 minute opening statement, which will be followed by questions from committee members.

**Ms WHITE** — Thank you for your invitation. This statement is on flood planning and preparedness in the state of Victoria. Flood emergency planning occurs at the state, regional and municipal level under the auspices of key forums and committees. The plans at all tiers recognise the responsibilities that agencies have to their customers and to the broader community. The plans enable a shared understanding of flood threats and impacts within a designated footprint and detail the arrangements and responsibilities of agencies and communities with regard to flood emergencies.

The emergency management acts of 1986 and 2013 are the empowering legislation for the management of emergencies in Victoria. The *Emergency Management Manual Victoria* contains the policy and planning documents for Emergency Management Victoria and provides the details about the roles different organisations play in our emergency management arrangements. Victoria State Emergency Service has a lead role in flood response in partnership with the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, catchment management authorities, Melbourne Water, the Bureau of Meteorology and local government. Flood plans are subplans to the existing emergency management plans at state, regional and municipal levels.

In May 2016 Victoria State Emergency Service undertook a consultative review and re-released the state flood subplan, which is a subordinate plan to the state emergency response plan which is approved by the State Crisis and Resilience Council.

Victoria State Emergency Service has six regional flood plans that are currently under review and will be reassessed in line with the draft emergency management planning bill 2016, if and when passed through cabinet.

Acting in support of municipal emergency management planning committees, in 2011 Victoria State Emergency Service also introduced the development of municipal flood emergency plans, predominantly off the back of the 2010–11 flood events, to build community resilience to flood emergencies, particularly in high-risk areas. At least 61 of these plans are now stored in the FloodZoom flood intelligence platform, which is auspiced by the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, with more in development across the state.

VicSES acknowledges the need to ensure that communities are involved in emergency planning to ensure community ownership of any outcomes. Through our community education programs and the development of local emergency plans, local knowledge and intelligence, Victoria State Emergency Service aims to collaborate in a two-way dialogue with communities and our key stakeholders about risk and actions.

There has been significant community involvement in flood planning, flood response and flood education programs in recent times, particularly around risk assessments for where these hazards may lie, with the introduction of the community emergency risk assessment program, which deals with hazard risk, impact risk and consequent risk to the communities. A report was released two months ago, with an overall overarching risk assessment for the state.

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In conclusion further outcomes are realised in supporting communities to better understand the who, the what, the when and the how of emergency events — believing they know how to do it, believing they can do it, believing everyone has a role to play and believing that will make a difference. That concludes my statement.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much. Kate, I had the opportunity to attend the 40-year celebration of the Sunbury SES on Saturday night. I have been in Sunbury for 32 years, and it was a terrific event. I think the SES is the lifeblood of so many communities, particularly in rural and regional Victoria. Every member at some point throughout the night wanted to speak to me about funding, trucks, how they can obtain funding, what they can do more of and how the funding model works. I think if you spoke to many people in the community, A, they would not be able to tell you how an SES is funded and, B, they would be quite surprised to learn that it is a unique-type model. I think at the last state budget there was \$35 million roughly committed for new trucks, boats, trailers and modern buildings. I wanted to ask you specifically, though, how does council funding compare to state government funding of the SES?

**Ms WHITE** — In relation to that at the moment, we are currently working with state government and the Municipal Association of Victoria in looking at those funding structures and working through the model that will look quite different from what it has historically been — funded through local governments. The model now will be funded through the state government, so that is in place at the highest levels.

**The CHAIR** — Sure. Thank you for that. My numbers show 142 VicSES units across 79 municipalities and this interesting arrangement where some municipalities do not have a unit based on the original amalgamations and the fact that the two were never really aligned. Do you have some comments around that?

**Ms WHITE** — We are 5000 strong. It is 142 units with seven support units, so technically we say we have 149. We are going through our service strategy at the moment to 2025 to look at how the service actually moves forward with the community. There are a lot of challenges with a volunteer agency. One of those is: where do you actually place units? And responding to community need. In that I would suggest that we have great support across the 149 units that we currently have, and we are looking at new and innovative ways to actually lead the service into the future.

**The CHAIR** — Okay.

**Mr RAMSAY** — Thank you, Kate. With the introduction of rate capping — another committee I sit on — councils have expressed concerns about the ongoing funding that they are required, as part of the partnership, to provide, including for certain infrastructure and maintenance needs for SES facilities — shedding and equipment. I understand the government has made — I am not sure if it is a one-off contribution or an ongoing contribution to the costs of managing some of the assets of state emergency services in local depots around regional councils. Have the regional councils now absolved themselves of the financial responsibility of providing support for SES in the historical forms that they had?

**Ms WHITE** — I am unable to answer the question, because I am not across that level of detail.

**Mr RAMSAY** — All right. If I get a chance down the track, I might come back to that, because I know the government has allocated \$34 million to the SES, but I am not sure on what basis.

The question that I perhaps should have referred to you initially — I referred it to the previous witness — is that in early 2011, with the floods, particularly up in Horsham, in that area, there were internal ructions between CFA and SES in their responsibilities of providing some community safety in respect to flooding. There did not appear to be any sort of working relationship between CFA and SES and their roles — and expertise and skills, I must say — with volunteers providing the sort of skills that were required to do the strategic work of placing sandbags and levee banks and all the other things. There is now quite a big requirement on councils to provide longer term flood mitigation plans and protect their local municipality assets and communities with levee banks and the like. Is that becoming more onerous on councils, or is there more responsibility for SES in fulfilling their acts to support councils in doing that sort of work?

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**Ms WHITE** — I will go back to your first statement around the 2010–11 floods and SES and CFA. A significant amount of work has been undertaken in a partnership approach — not just with the CFA — in actually ensuring that our future planning and response to flood events in Victoria moves past what was experienced in the 2010–11 floods.

As far as the obligations for flood planning and preparedness, the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning are responsible for the oversight of the flood plain risk management arrangements and have introduced the Victorian flood management strategy, which clarifies those roles and responsibilities of government agencies and those authorities that are involved in flood management.

They set out particular obligations, actions and responsibilities with that strategy that was undertaken through a consultative approach with all the key players, including Victoria State Emergency Service and local government. So those obligations and actions sit within that particular strategy. On the weighting — if you are asking whether there is a particular weighting that was there or not there — I think that consultation on that strategy was worked through and agreed to by all parties.

**Ms HALFPENNY** — I was just wondering, with the audits of the emergency management plans the SES undertakes of councils, what has been the result of those three-yearly audits? Are councils fulfilling their obligations? Our inquiry is more about flood mitigation, but I guess it is the management plans overall.

**Ms WHITE** — Sure. Victoria State Emergency Service audits municipal emergency management plans on a three-yearly cycle. All 79 councils are involved in the process. That is a panel audit approach conducted with the regional planning committees, the Department of Health and Human Services and Victoria Police. All councils pass audit, whether initially or secondarily. If they are unable to pass audit the first time, the key partners and stakeholders work with that local government to ensure that we actually work on those areas that require the work that was identified —

**Ms HALFPENNY** — So they all passed the most recent audit?

**Ms WHITE** — Yes, correct. They have all passed.

**Ms HALFPENNY** — Okay. And then in some cases there was a requirement to do a little bit more work?

**Ms WHITE** — Yes, a re-audit within 12 months to meet their obligations under the Emergency Management Act.

**Ms HALFPENNY** — So in terms of those that had some problems, was it to do with resources? What were the reasons? I guess our inquiry is looking at the sustainability and operational requirements of councils and how they are fulfilling their responsibilities. What were some of the reasons why they were not able to get through the audit at the first go?

**Ms WHITE** — I do not have that level of information to hand, and I would say that they would all be unique — particular to that council and their plan. So I am unable to provide that to you. I just do not have information on the audits.

**Ms HALFPENNY** — Is it possible to provide the committee at some stage with that in writing or something?

**Ms WHITE** — Yes.

**Ms HALFPENNY** — It would be interesting to see whether it is a resource issue or some other reason.

Just getting back to the funding, and this might be something on notice as well, my understanding is that because of the introduction of the protections of ratepayers around CPI-only rises in rates, the state government is providing funding to support councils in some of their responsibilities, such as emergency management. My understanding is, and I think this is what Simon was asking, in regard to the money

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provided in the last state budget, is that to support the SES so that councils are not required to provide as much resourcing? From what I understand councils seem to do buildings and maintenance and — from what we have been advised — motor registration, whereas the state government funding is about the vehicles themselves. I wonder if you could clarify that.

**Ms WHITE** — My understanding is that the funding that was allocated to the Victoria State Emergency Service was in buildings and assets. I am unable to comment around the actual funding model per se.

**Ms HALFPENNY** — And whether it was designed to then allow councils to pull a little bit back?

**Ms WHITE** — Yes.

**Mr RAMSAY** — Can I just say that in our notes it says \$1.8 million to \$1.9 million per year for ongoing maintenance, but councils tell us that they spend over \$3.2 million per year, whether that is in kind or in cash. So there is a gap between the government's budget commitment and what councils traditionally provide.

**Mr RIORDAN** — Just looking at the report that you provided with the details, I am assuming that that is the contribution from those councils in 2016 to their various units. This was in the local government survey consolidated responses.

**The CHAIR** — You may be confused. That would be the MAV —

**Mr RIORDAN** — Anyway, the point I am making on that is that across my six shires — there are roughly 130 000 across 14 shires — so you are looking at roughly about \$10 000 per unit funded from local government resources. I get the sense that the various SES units around the state tend to have their specialities based on their local area, so obviously the ones to the north have bigger flooding issues in my area. It tends to be around supporting the CFA at bushfire time and, increasingly, car accidents. So there is a whole lot of expertise in rescuing people off the end of cliffs and all sorts of things.

**Ms WHITE** — Correct.

**Mr RIORDAN** — So my question is, and you have raised many times in the documents supplied, about the appropriateness of local government now being responsible for this. Has your organisation done work around if you were to rethink the way that the SES is funded and supported? I think there is reference to it being more like a CFA model in terms of the hierarchy and the way it is funded. What sort of extra funding from state government would be required?

**Ms WHITE** — Just to clarify, my understanding is that Victoria State Emergency Service did not supply a written submission?

**The CHAIR** — That is correct.

**Ms WHITE** — The chief executive officer and the board have done extensive consultation in regard to the funding matter. As I made reference to, we have our service delivery strategy to 2025 and we are currently working with the state government and the Municipal Association of Victoria, looking at the actual funding as it has been, how it stands now and where it will move to in the future.

**Mr RIORDAN** — So the actual dollar cost of what is required into the future has not been pinned down as yet?

**Ms WHITE** — Not to my understanding.

**Mr RIORDAN** — There also seems, in terms of the assets, to be a mixed bag of control of the assets. Some are council-owned assets in terms of where the shed is sited or the service. Others have probably been fundraised by the local SES. So has there been work done around whether if you change the model, how the ownership and asset sharing would go?

**Ms WHITE** — Yes, there has been work undertaken, particularly around the buildings, and that forms part of the basis of the funding of recent times. We are looking at the actual building locations and their suitability for Victoria State Emergency Service needs around that. That is working very closely with local government on that matter.

**Mr RICHARDSON** — Thanks, Kate, for popping in. I have just a few lines of questioning. Firstly, just a breakdown with metro council SES units and rural and regional councils: it appears on just the numbers from MAV that there are 36 metro council units, or roughly that, and 106 in the rural and regional councils. Do you have a volunteer breakdown between the metro and regional and rural councils?

**Ms WHITE** — Yes, we would have, but I do not have that to hand.

**Mr RICHARDSON** — Can we get that information, if that is possible? The reason I ask about that is that there is obviously a significant discrepancy between the number of CFA brigades and SES units. From this, there are 142 SES units and there are about 1200 CFA brigades. In my neck of the woods down in Mordialloc, which is not a regional and rural example, but which has great application for some of these challenges of SES, there is a recent memorandum of understanding that has been worked on with the SES and the CFA to combine volunteer resources, fundraising initiatives and potentially space to ensure that they are not pulling volunteers away from different regions.

I note that some of the units are the subject of pre-amalgamation concerns and challenges. Is that being looked at to support SES in their work and how they can better integrate with the CFA and the EMV banner to get greater synergies for those local communities?

**Ms WHITE** — That work is being undertaken at all levels. So that is about volunteerism in local communities. Yes, we are looking at the fact that we do not want to be competing with one another in the same space. That comes across perhaps both buildings as well as planning and engaging with the local communities. We are very keen and we work very hard with the CFA and other partners so that we do not go in on Monday and talk about flood, and somebody else goes in on Tuesday and talks about fire. So this is also about supporting better community-centred outcomes.

**Mr RICHARDSON** — Are there any examples where that is working well at the moment — that collaboration between units and CFAs? It is simply because I think that in the spaces that some brigades occupy there could be crossover during different seasons when they are effectively SES volunteers as well. That happens in our neck of the woods. Is there any region where that is working well? And as a supplementary to that, are there any regions across Victoria that you see as particularly vulnerable and not covered by SES volunteers at the moment?

**Ms WHITE** — It really goes to the context of your question. So we have many, many examples of programs of works working quite effectively in a collaborative and collegiate approach with the communities, and that is community-based emergency management. There are examples of co-location sites that are working well. Any organisation has challenges in particular areas in supporting communities, and not every emergency service organisation or volunteer can be at every household or in every community. So it is how, particularly through the service delivery strategy, you might start looking at the way that we, one, recruit volunteers, but, two, how we actually structure the units, and that might be a hub-and-spoke model or the like. That is all under consultation at the moment, to look at a more viable and sustainable way in delivering the business to ensure better community outcomes.

**The CHAIR** — We might have the opportunity to go around again if you are happy to do so. I will give members the opportunity to ask one more question, and mine is, I like to think, reasonably straightforward. This committee is tasked with, if you like, looking at determining and analysing those challenges that rural and regional councils face. Do you in your role see more challenges with the relationship between those rural and regional councils and the SES compared to metro and, if you like, peri-urban councils? Are there more challenges or less?

**Ms WHITE** — Interesting question. I would answer your question in a different way. I do not see that there are challenges per se between the regional-rural or metropolitan councils in the way that Victoria

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State Emergency Service is working with them. I think each community has different needs, which goes on the basis that the level of engagement of communities is also different between rural and regional areas and a metropolitan area. I would ask: how many people that are living in high-rise communities actually know their neighbours very well, as opposed to those that are living in smaller communities that actually do know their community members very well? So the challenges for us are quite different across the board, but I would say that it is not specifically in the way that our partners are engaging with us in how we actually overcome those.

**Mr RAMSAY** — I just want to go back if I may, Kate, to a question I asked before, and this is around the flood planning responsibilities of local council. Now I would have liked to have posed it to your chief executive officer, given Steve has been both CEO of a local government municipality — a large one in fact, Geelong — and now CEO of SES. I assume he still is.

**Ms WHITE** — Yes, he is, and he passes on his apologies for not being here.

**Mr RAMSAY** — That is all right. Do you believe that local government is the appropriate body to have some management of flood planning strategies, given that a lot of the flooding is the result of management plans by the CMAs and local water authorities? We had VicWater in here just before, who you heard. All have some responsibility in water flow across the state. I am just looking at ways to remove some of the responsibilities off councils, and the costs associated with it, to other agencies. Submissions from some of the regional councils indicated they do not want the responsibility — give it to someone else who actually has some management control of some of the waterways. Should they be the planning authority on these issues?

**Ms WHITE** — To clarify when we talk about flood planning, there are two components of flood planning. One is flood plain management, which is worked through the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, and that is in the *Victorian Floodplain Management Strategy*. The other part of flood planning is actually preparing communities before, during and after an emergency. So I am taking that your question relates to flood plain management planning in this instance?

**Mr RAMSAY** — We had submissions from East Gippsland and Baw Baw, who all have issues in that area.

**Ms WHITE** — I just want to make sure we are talking about the same flood planning in answering your question. So I take it that we are talking about flood plain management, which is about mitigation.

**Mr RAMSAY** — And coordination, I think, because they are principally the relevant authority for coordinating flood planning in their regions — the municipalities, as against other agencies.

**Ms WHITE** — The flood plain management function is carried out by catchment management authorities in regional Victoria and Melbourne Water in metropolitan Melbourne. They work with local governments to do that. Victoria State Emergency is the lead in planning for flood emergencies in Victoria, and we are highly reliant on the flood plain management stakeholders to inform us of those. Local government is involved in both, depending on where they are and, depending on their local capacity and capability, will determine their level of involvement. But in that context, in what I have just explained, they do not lead those components.

**Mr RAMSAY** — I will have to refer back to submissions. My understanding was that they are seen as the coordinating authority with those other stakeholders like CMAs and water authorities.

**Ms WHITE** — They certainly have critical interdependencies on that. Having flood plain management, it is the catchment management authorities or Melbourne Water. In flood response and preparedness planning, it is Victoria State Emergency Service.

**Ms HALFPENNY** — In terms of the reports you get back, what is the infrastructure to mitigate flooding — levies and that sort of stuff? Is that infrastructure still reasonable? Is it deteriorating or is the standard getting better? Do you hear?

**Ms WHITE** — I think a significant investment is being placed in mitigation strategy policy and planning since 2010, 2011. A lot of work and consultation has gone into the *Victorian Floodplain Management Strategy*, where those obligations, actions and accountabilities sit. As I said, we are very much informed by that to ensure that what we cannot negate or mitigate, we can actually plan to respond to and make communities better aware of it.

**Ms HALFPENNY** — So does that mean that in terms of implementation of the actual physical structures, there is an assessment? If they are not there, then other actions are considered? Is that what you are saying?

**Ms WHITE** — Correct.

**Ms HALFPENNY** — So you look at what is there and there is not really an assessment of whether it is good or bad. It is just, ‘Well, that’s what’s there and therefore this is how we have to prepare’.

**Ms WHITE** — As part of the risk assessment in looking at hazard risk and the impacts and consequences to that, we do do assessments of the current mitigation practices and processes currently in place and that then informs the flood planning response plans.

**Ms HALFPENNY** — So that means the physical stuff when you talk about the practices and the processes?

**Ms WHITE** — Yes, that includes physical.

**The CHAIR** — Kate, can we thank you for your time and for your fantastic work with the State Emergency Service. Thank you for presenting to the committee and answering our questions.

**Ms WHITE** — Thank you all for your time.

**Witness withdrew.**