

# VERIFIED VERSION

## PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into budget estimates 2013–14

Melbourne — 16 May 2013

#### Members

Mr N. Angus  
Ms J. Hennessy  
Mr D. Morris  
Mr D. O'Brien

Mr C. Ondarchie  
Mr M. Pakula  
Mr R. Scott

Chair: Mr D. Morris  
Deputy Chair: Mr M. Pakula

#### Staff

Executive Officer: Ms V. Cheong

#### Witnesses

Mr K. Wells, Minister for Bushfire Response;

Mr G. Wilson, Secretary, and

Mr N. Robertson, Executive Director, Police and Emergency Management, Department of Justice; and  
Commissioner C. Lapsley, Fire Services Commissioner, Fire Services Commissioner of Victoria.

**The CHAIR** — I welcome back the minister, in his role as Minister for Bushfire Response, together with Mr Wilson, Mr Robertson and Commissioner Lapsley. I call on the minister to give a brief presentation of no more than 5 minutes on the more complex financial and performance information relating to the bushfire portfolio.

**Overheads shown.**

**Mr WELLS** — Thank you, Chair. The Liberal coalition is committed to implementing all — —

**Ms HENNESSY** — Liberal coalition?

**The CHAIR** — Order!

**Mr WELLS** — The Liberal-Nationals coalition is committed to implementing all 67 of the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission's final report. To drive that commitment the government established a unique bushfire response portfolio to oversee the implementation of its response to the royal commission across a range of departments and agencies. In May 2011 the state's implementation plan implementing the government's response to the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission was tabled in Parliament. The implementation plan includes 250 measures, which are actions, to improve the ability to mitigate, prepare and plan for response to and recover from future bushfires. It is supported by an investment of over \$900 million.

The royal commission recommended the appointment of an independent monitor to assess progress with implementing the commission's recommendations, which is recommendation 66. The Bushfires Royal Commission Implementation Monitor Act 2011 put the appointment, functions and reporting obligations of the monitor on an independent statutory footing.

Recommendation #1 was to implement the location-based Emergency Alert. The ability to send messages to mobile phones based on location of a phone has further improved Emergency Alert, the national telephone emergency warning system. The service became available to Telstra customers on 21 November. Sirens were introduced as a new policy, including existing CFA sirens, and a pilot is being conducted in that area. On fire danger rating signs, following the successful trial of 11–12 we have more automated signs, which are helping high-risk areas. On the bushfire safety policy framework, the framework provides direction and guidance to departments and agencies on improving bushfire safety.

Recommendation 3 — that please be assured I am not going through every single recommendation, just to reassure the committee — deals with community information guides, that were formerly known as township protection plans, which target approximately 580 locations. The vulnerable people in emergency program is facilitating proactive events to enable people who are vulnerable in high-risk areas on high-danger days. The government has also established an \$11.3 million municipal fire and emergency management resourcing program, and also a fire ready communities program, providing \$5 million from the Regional Growth Fund.

Recommendation 4 shelter options. A total of 265 neighbourhood safer places have been established as of May 2013. The government is funding the necessary works to ensure these sites meet strict CFA and municipal assessment criteria. There is also another \$2 million that was placed in the 12–13 state budget to support fire refuges and refuge pilots.

Recommendation 22 emergency services communications. The CFA is implementing a new radio dispatch service — and I had the great pleasure of being out there the other day — has upgraded its radio for use on its network to interoperate with the old DSE, now DEPI, and the CFA radio rollout will conclude later this year?

**Comm. LAPSLEY** — Yes.

**Mr WELLS** — Later this year. There is also the Victoria State Emergency Service, VICSES, and DEPI have also been funded to replace their radio fleet, so making it a more efficient system.

Recommendation 46 is the buyback scheme. A total of 198 applications were received and assessed by the bushfire land acquisition panel. One hundred and thirty eight of those applications were eligible and proceeded to valuation.

Recommendation 63 the fire services commissioner. The reform action plan is designed to improve and modernise the way all emergency services agencies work as one integrated and unified team. We have special planning for a Dandenong Ranges landscaping planning pilot.

Recommendation 64 the fire services property levy, which we maintain is a fairer system of collecting from the community in order to pay for the fire services. It is abolishing a tax on a tax, and we have obviously appointed a fire services levy monitor.

Further responses to the royal commission power line bushfire safety taskforce rec 21 and 32, deliberately lit fires rec 35 and 36, planning and build recs, land and fuel management recs 56 to 61.

How much time have I — —

**The CHAIR** — You are just about out.

**Mr WELLS** — I am just about out. We are dealing with the issues of power lines, planning buildings and planned burning, and we have obviously set out a time line for these completed recommendations.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you, Minister. We now have just a shade under 55 minutes — about 53 minutes — for the balance of the hearings this morning. I might ask the first question again. Minister, in the context of the 2013–14 budget, can you outline to the committee examples of capital infrastructure projects in the bushfire response portfolio which will be either commenced or completed in the coming financial year?

**Mr WELLS** — The Victorian government has continued its commitments to strengthen the Victorian emergency services by investing and delivering major capital works across the state. In the 13–14 budget the government has continued its commitment by providing a further \$61 million for 142 new or upgraded stations in regional Victoria. A number of emergency management infrastructure projects over a number of years have been completed or will be completed in 2013–14, which is the nub of your question.

In relation to the CFA, Ballarat East fire station upgrade, major renovations of the 150-year old heritage-listed Ballarat East fire station; there has been land purchased for Edithvale, purchase of adjacent land to current station in Edithvale for future development; station upgrades, the delivery of 60 rural fire stations, including SES co-location; rural fire stations upgrade, delivery of 48 new or upgraded rural fire stations; crew protection, which was one of the questions we were asked in the previous hearing, the retrofitting of 844 tankers with enhanced crew protection systems; enhancing CFA vehicles, delivery of 101 new fleet vehicles; vehicle replacement stage 2, the delivery 35 medium tankers; and with the Department of Justice the telephone-based emergency warning system, implementation of the second phase of emergency alert project to enable warning to be sent to mobile phones based on physical location of the phone, which I outlined as part of my presentation.

In regard to ESTA, which is crucial to the emergency systems and the bushfire response, we have computer-aided despatch upgrades — upgrade to software that supports despatch of emergency services by 000 calls; the CAD resilience, the delivery of ICT infrastructure upgrades to improve existing CAD resilience; emergency alerting service upgrades; and radios, as we have spoken about before.

In regard to the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission, we have the bushfire buyback scheme the retreat and resettlement, non-compulsory acquisition of land from owners impacted directly by the Black Saturday fires; the communications, making sure that there is the interconnect between CFA and the Department of Environment and Primary Industries; greater communication strategies to identify and remediate radio black spots; and a statewide network or incident control centres, upgrade of 10 command and control centres.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you, Minister.

**Mr PAKULA** — Minister, in your contribution you made reference to the fire services levy. I am wondering if you are familiar with some concerns that have been raised by the Shire of Nillumbik in regard to the comparative fire services levy costs for the parts of the shire that are in the MFB district and the parts that are in the CFA district, and particularly the fact that when you look down through the various different types of levy — whether they be residential, primary production, commercial, industrial, public benefit or vacant — the CFA rate exceeds the MFB rate by between 67 per cent and 80 per cent simply on the basis of which part of the shire you are in. The point made by the mayor is that people in communities who provide fire protection for the

state, being over 56 000 volunteer CFA members, will pay more than those in the MFB area who do not, so what message is the government sending? I am wondering what your response to that would be?

**Mr WELLS** — This is a difficult one for me to answer.

**Mr PAKULA** — You have made reference to it in there.

**Mr WELLS** — Yes. I was just about to address that part of it. The issue of the response to the bushfires royal commission is my responsibility, the actual response to implement the 67 recommendations. The issue of the fire services levy is for the role of the Treasurer, so whilst my responsibility — —

**Mr PAKULA** — You were the Treasurer until a few weeks ago.

**The CHAIR** — Order!

**Mr ANGUS** — Let him finish. You asked him about — —

**The CHAIR** — Order! The hearing is into the portfolio of bushfire response.

**Mr WELLS** — Martin is correct; it is a recommendation of the bushfires royal commission that we should move to a property-based fire services levy, something that was strongly supported by my side of politics. The actual implementation and the operation of the fire services levy is the responsibility of the Treasurer. But I do make this point: on the point that has been raised by Martin in regard to the boundary between the CFA and the MFB, there will be some differences of rates because some live in the MFB area and some live in the CFA area. That has been there for decades and decades under the old system and the new system, that there were different rates between CFA and MFB, but more specific answers to the operations of the fire services levy need to be directed to the Treasurer.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you, Minister. Do you want to attempt a supplementary?

**Mr PAKULA** — I will. I am just wondering whether as the minister and as the former Treasurer you are in a position to make any comment about the concern that has been raised about the potential skewing effect, the disincentive in terms of the establishment of local businesses on the basis of that fairly, I suppose, random boundary between the CFA and MFB areas and the tax differentiation that is effectively going to be put in place as a result of this change?

**The CHAIR** — Just before I call on the minister — —

**Mr O'BRIEN** — The differentiation is already there; this will just bring it out.

**The CHAIR** — Mr O'Brien will come to order, thank you. Just before I call the minister, I do want to make the point that the minister is here as the Minister for Bushfire Response. Whatever roles he may have had in the past are not now relevant. We are interested in his current role.

**Mr PAKULA** — They are relevant to his knowledge.

**Mr WELLS** — There has always been a difference between a CFA area and an MFB area. That has always been the case. Under the previous collection of the fire services levy, based on insurance premiums, was grossly unfair because only those people who actually insured at the correct amount were contributing fairly to the fire services. So we had situations in some areas where people do not insure or they underinsured; in those two cases they do not contribute fairly. I think the new fire services levy based on property is a fairer system, but I acknowledge that there has always been a difference even under the old system, and there will continue to be those differences between the MFB and the CFA areas.

**Mr ANGUS** — Minister, I refer you to budget information paper 1, page 27, and a matter that you touched on extensively in your presentation a few moments ago. I want to quote from that page, where it says that the government has committed to implementing all 67 recommendations of the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission. My question is: can you provide the committee with an update on what actions will be taken to address any outstanding issues relating to the government's commitment to implement all outstanding royal commission recommendations?

**Mr WELLS** — The coalition is committed to implementing, as you said, all of the recommendations of the bushfires royal commission. We extended the time for the independent Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission Implementation Monitor to provide annual reports on progress to Parliament. I think that is the best way of doing it.

I just want to say that in a report last year Mr Comrie stated that the state has continued to employ substantial resources to implement its commitment; a substantial number of the bushfire recommendations have now been implemented; in general terms he is satisfied that the state has made very good progress in meeting its commitments, and; there is clear evidence that Victoria is now substantially better prepared on a regular basis to respond to bushfire risk than at the time of Black Saturday — and so it should be, and thank goodness. In this year's budget, the Department of Environment and Primary Industries has received \$33.7 million to increase planned burning, as a direct response to that. So far this year the state has burnt an area in excess of more than 200,000 hectares. This was an area of great neglect. This year also, as Martin has pointed out, about the fire services levy, recommendation 17 of the commission's report related to the accreditation of level 3 incident controllers, because those people that are driving the events out on a fire ground need to be the best trained, and it needs to be seamless between agencies. Level 3 incident controllers are personnel — whether they are paid or volunteers — who are trained and experienced in leading a team tasked with managing major emergencies. This is absolutely crucial. Level 3 incident management teams have a number of functional roles, such as planning, logistics, operations and information, which come under the supervision of the incident controller. The training, accreditation and provision of an adequate number of level 3 incident controllers was raised as an issue at the royal commission, and budget paper 3, page 193, second item from the bottom, shows that we are progressing ahead of schedule on that measure.

**Mr SCOTT** — Budget information paper 1, page 26, makes reference to the fire recovery unit and its role in facilitating strong relationships and clear responses to identified community needs. It was reported last week, I think on 10 May, by ABC news that schools in bushfire-affected communities around Diamond Creek, Whittlesea and Strathewen have been forced to start fundraising activities in their local area to raise half a million dollars for bushfire counselling services. These programs support students that the community says are suffering severe anxiety and are children in crisis as a response to their experiences from the bushfires. They are forced to do this because government funding has dried up and they desperately need youth programs and support. Minister, can you explain the rationale of government for stopping funding to this bushfire counselling program, and will you provide the \$500 000 needed to continue this vital work?

**Mr WELLS** — We made a commitment to ensuring individuals and communities affected continue to be supported through the recovery. For example, we set up the fire recovery unit for two years, which is what you have outlined. It provided an important interface between affected individuals and communities. The unit also provided a variety of mechanisms from which people could access information and other information that they were requiring. The unit will gradually wind down as the recovery progresses.

I am aware of your concerns; I read the reports in the paper. It will be something that I will discuss further with the Minister for Community Services and the department to have a closer look at some of the claims that have been made. If there is a genuine need for counselling to continue then I think that is something that we will need to continue to look at further.

**Mr SCOTT** — Minister, I suppose I am a bit disturbed by the statement, 'if there is a need'. I am sure you would not cast aspersions on the principals or other persons identifying this need.

**Mr WELLS** — No, absolutely not.

**Mr SCOTT** — You say you will be looking at the matter. Can you please indicate, for the benefit of those communities affected, when you will be making a decision and hopefully restoring funding to these vitally needed services in these communities?

**Mr WELLS** — That is a fair point, and we will be as a matter of course — that assessment is in progress now, and further discussions will follow between myself and the Minister for Community Services to make sure that any need that is required in those areas is addressed fairly, because I think it is a legitimate point. We went to Kinglake a few weeks ago and spoke to the people there; there is still hurt. We went to Marysville a couple of weeks ago; we talked to the people there. There is that rebuild, which is great. For attracting people back into

Marysville and back into tourism; that is good news. But the underlying issue of a need for further counselling is an important one. It will be one that we will be investigating and we will be looking at the issues that were raised in the media a couple of weeks ago.

**Mr O'BRIEN** — I, too, would like to refer to budget information paper 1, *Rural and Regional Victoria*, and the reference on page 27 as to the statement that the government has committed to implementing all 67 recommendations of the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission. I ask you, Minister: can you advise the committee of details on the most recent bushfire season in Victoria and how the implementation of the bushfires royal commission recommendations has contributed to the outcome?

**Mr WELLS** — I will answer part of it, and then I will refer to Craig for follow-up around the actual operations of how it has panned out. This season is the first substantial fire season Victoria has had since 2009, and it has obviously tested the state in many ways. This season was in part due to above-average temperatures and dry fuel loads increasing the potential for fire activity across the state. The forecast was for a normal, average November and December, but in January the extreme heat in Central Australia changed the landscape and this set the scene for January, February and March to be hotter than we anticipated.

The fire behaviour was intense, unpredictable and very dangerous, and I think Jill made the point about what happened at Dereel, where the weather warning was one thing but on the day it just changed in a flash. It ended up being a very hot, long, dry summer with no rain. Tragically a community member and four firefighters lost their lives, while 46 houses — not all places of primary residence — were also destroyed. Volunteer and career support from the CFA, the DSE, when it was, Parks Victoria and the MFB responded to more than 4400 bush and grassfires in the four months from December, so that is significant. There is no question that volunteers play enormous role in defending and protecting Victorian communities, and we pay great tribute to the CFA and the SES for doing that.

Since December 2012 there have been 24 significant fires. Some have taken an extended period of time to contain. Over 200 000 hectares of public and private land was burnt between December and March, with livestock losses of around 2400 as well as 1300 kilometres of fencing. This has been the most active fire season Victoria has had for four years and included a number of significant fires at Aberfeldy, Harrietville, Grampians, Donnybrook and Dereel. I will ask the fire services commissioner to make comment about the actual operations.

**Comm. LAPSLEY** — Thank you, Minister and Chair. If I keep going on to extend where the minister has taken us about the fire season, it has been one of significance, and I think there is a number of things that is not always obvious to the eye from afar. One is the protection of the water catchments. The water catchments had significant pressure with fires around the catchments and at some stages in the catchments, but they were well protected. That also involved not only Parks Victoria, DSE, CFA but also Melbourne Water and the water authorities, which was quite critical. It also goes on to say that we were able to look at preseason training this year that was quite significant. Over 1500 personnel attended for multi-agency training, which meant that we were far better prepared than ever before and certainly moving into a key issue.

The bushfire safety policy framework, which is part of the first eight recommendations of the royal commission, has been put in place and is reviewed annually. It looks at the approaches of warnings, the use of Emergency Alert and the focus on leaving early, which is a key theme and something that we have not sponsored in this state before until after the royal commission.

Arson prevention led by VicPol has been absolutely significant. We have now detected an increased number of arsonists, and I think that is due to the fact that we have got better surveillance systems, but the prevention detection saw that there was in excess of 20 people already being charged or being processed with arson-related offences in mid-January this year. Incident controllers accreditation was one of the key things that the royal commission brought forward and we now have now achieved a new accreditation system for DSE, CFA and the Metropolitan Fire Brigade, and soon that will be extended outside fire to SES, and a new regional control system was established, unlike in previous years.

They are all significant things operationally, but it goes to the community. Community warnings, the fire rating system, was something that was significant. We learnt a lot about the warning systems this year and about being

able and agile enough to change and modify as we went through to get the emphasis right. It was supplemented by 270 community information guides which were previously township protection plans.

Earlier we discussed helicopters and air aviation. We run an extensive fleet of helicopters and fixed-wing machines across the state, a total of 41, but run another call-when-needed machines, and at one stage we were operating 68 helicopters and aircraft in the state, which is something that was unprecedented in many other cases. Likewise, the control system has been modified significantly. We have now got a single state controller. I perform that role most of the time, and if it is not me it is delegated to one of the chief officers of the agencies who then leaves their agency and performs the role of state controller where they have got overall responsibilities and not just agency responsibilities. That is a fundamental change to where we have been before.

It goes on that our state control centre has been modified, daily briefings have been improved, our mapping system has been increased and our ability to forecast and predict fires has meant we are not only in a better position but we are better able to interact with the community. In doing that there is lots of work and I have got no doubt that the agencies themselves are seeing a different way to operate. We have heavily sponsored interoperability. We have heavily said that there is only one way to operate now and that is in a joined-up way, it is an improved way and it will continue to be that way.

**Ms HENNESSY** — Minister, I wanted to ask you a question about fire refuges being one of the bushfires royal commission recommendations. You would obviously be aware that fire-prone communities have been feeling pretty frustrated with the ongoing broken promises about when the fire refuges will be ready. Initially they were going to be done by the 2012-13 fire season; then the promise moved out to the start of the 2013 school year. It is my understanding, Minister, that one of the key reasons for the delays is that there is a dispute between your department and the Department of Education around issues that go to who bears the legal liability and who bears the ongoing obligation around maintenance funding and that the Department of Education is looking for some money for that purpose. Can you tell the committee: when will the fire refuges be open, and who is going to bear legal responsibility and have responsibility for maintenance?

**Mr WELLS** — Thanks, Jill. The recommendation to build refuges for fire is going to be a world first. There is, to my knowledge, nowhere else in the world that has a building as a fire refuge. Because this is a world first, many places around the world are watching what we do, and we are going to make sure that it is 100 per cent right before I sign off or tick off anything, because the message is very, very clear: the safest option is to leave a high-risk bushfire area well before the bushfire starts. That has got to be the message, very clearly. Leaving early or on the night before or the morning where there is a severe or extreme code red danger rating is always the safest option, and we just cannot stress that enough.

As Jill has mentioned, the bushfires royal commission called for the state to introduce a comprehensive approach to bushfire options. While there are a number of neighbourhood safer places established across Victoria there are some high-risk locations where it is not possible to establish a neighbourhood safer place. The government supports creating additional last resort shelter options so that people in high bushfire areas have access to a range of bushfire safety options relevant to local community and individual circumstances. So we allocated \$2 million in 12-13 — —

**Ms HENNESSY** — When are they going to be open? I know all of this information. I would like you to focus on the question.

**The CHAIR** — Order! Is that a supplementary?

**Mr ANGUS** — Yes, I think it is.

**Mr ONDARCHIE** — It's about three supplementaries.

**The CHAIR** — In that case I ask that the minister be allowed to respond in silence from all committee members, and I will then offer the opportunity for a supplementary question, if necessary.

**Mr WELLS** — This is an important issue — there is no question about that — but as I said at the opening of my response, this will mean Victoria is a world leader in planning, designing and constructing refuges, including fuel management and other issues. There is a pilot that is being led by the fire services commissioner,

and I will ask him to comment on it, but we are working in partnership with VicRoads, Yarra Ranges, other councils and the high-risk communities of East Warburton, Ferny Creek, Millgrove and Blackwood. These locations were selected because of the high-risk fire danger areas. Work is well under way on the development of a community fire refuge at East Warburton and Ferny Creek primary schools, and building works are due to be completed by the end of June.

Planning for a site of the Millgrove community fire refuge is also well under way, a new CFA Blackwood fire station built to community fire refuge standards is due to be completed prior to the 13–14 fire season. All agencies involved in the project are committed to working together to complete this complex project, but before I hand over to the fire services commissioner, I make the point again: the message is clear that when there is a severe fire warning you have got to get out. To rely on a step-down place of safety makes no sense to me. We will not — I will not — be ticking off on these refuges until I am 100 per cent satisfied that they are safe, because there has to be backup power, there have to be cooling systems, the right sort of material and glass, and you have to say: would I want my family in that refuge if there was 1 per cent doubt? And the answer is no. But from an operational point of view, Craig?

**Comm. LAPSLEY** — The four pilot sites — and I will take you to timing and maintenance issues as I progress through in a process — are quite fundamental. There are three parts to the projects which are important. One is the infrastructure development, and the building works in two locations are programmed to be completed midyear; the second part is the community understanding of the facility and the third is the operation of the facility. The operation of the facility is very fundamental in the sense that it may not have fire service or police officers in attendance, so it needs to be owned by the community and understood by the community.

When we talk about the designation of which I have the legal responsibility to designate and also the responsibility to ensure that the system of works is audited annually. That is very critical. In the selection of the sites has been fundamental about joining up in a partnership with government agencies and not relying on where it is just a cricket club that has got a committee of management or a community member leading the committee of management. It needs structure.

Education has been fundamental in that, so the Ferny Creek school, the East Warburton school and the Millgrove school are the three sites for education. Ferny Creek and East Warburton, as Minister Wells has said, will be midyear — complete infrastructure works. We will then meet with the community and ensure that they have got the right operations and understanding of the place before we designate. So they are online to be operational before this summer fire season.

At Millgrove there are some technical issues. I do not know the actual time line because we are waiting for building assessments to be completed for us. The Blackwood fire station is a brand-new fire station. The planning permit has been submitted, and we are aiming for December 2013; however, with a planning scheme issue and community consultation, that is the best we will do. Who knows when we will designate as a result of that, but the aim is to get it in as close as we can. So that is timing.

On the maintenance issue, we have coupled up with agencies — as I have indicated, education and the CFA — to build it as part of their maintenance regime. They have maintenance regimes, they know how to run their buildings, and to add it to their community fire refuges is critical. That is another reason why we went to those sorts of government agencies to have a strong maintenance regime. We will work with those about what it means with the pilot, funding and so on.

**Ms HENNESSY** — Minister, the buck ultimately stops with you around the fire refuges. I want to clarify your evidence. Your evidence is that two fire refuges will be open by the commencement of this bushfire season, but two probably will not be. Is that correct?

**Mr WELLS** — No. I think I said in my evidence that the building would be completed. That does not mean that they will be open as a fire refuge. I want to make this point very clear.

**Members interjecting.**

**The CHAIR** — Order! The supplementary has been asked. The minister will now respond.

**Mr WELLS** — In fairness, as I said, there is no way known that I will be ticking off or signing off unless we are 100 per cent sure that the refuge is safe. I think that is what every single Victorian would expect the minister responsible to say. So whilst the building may be completed, as I outlined in my presentation, there is still a process where Craig will need to go through a process with other agencies to make sure that they are 100 per cent safe. We are working as hard and as fast as possible, but the message is clear: if there is a severe warning of danger on a particular day, leave. We will continue to work hard with Craig and others to make sure that not only is the construction completed but they are safe as a refuge. There is no point putting a time line on that because they need to be right. This is world first. This has not happened — —

**Ms HENNESSY** — You told the communities that they would be open in 2012–13, Minister, and then none of them — —

**Mr WELLS** — As I said — —

**Members interjecting.**

**The CHAIR** — Order! The minister has the call.

**Mr WELLS** — We are working very hard on this. As Craig has outlined and I have outlined, there are issues with the planning, the independent power and all the other things that go along with a refuge. It has to be 100 per cent right with no doubt. If we are putting 10 families into a school building, I want to make sure that it is going to be 100 per cent safe.

**Mr ONDARCHIE** — Minister, this is very important to me, as you know. I live in the area where those tragic 2009 bushfires occurred. My family lost friends and my children lost friends — try to explain to your children how their school friends are not coming back any more. I want to talk to you about the Safer Electricity Assets Fund, if I may, Minister. I refer you to budget information paper 1, page 27, where it talks about the government committing to all 67 recommendations. With specific reference to the royal commissioner's recommendations 27 and 32, can you provide us with an update on the Safer Electricity Assets Fund and the cost of the program over the forward estimates?

**Mr WELLS** — The Safer Electricity Assets Fund is a commitment designed to honour the bushfire royal commission's recommendation. The instruction is to apportion costs of bushfire mitigation between government and power consumers. The Powerline Bushfire Safety Taskforce was established to address, as you said, recommendations 27 and 32. It was directed to investigate the full range of options to introduce the risk of catastrophic bushfires from power. It should be noted that this is the recommendation that the previous Labor government chose not to support.

**Mr PAKULA** — That is not right. We said we would support it in part.

**The CHAIR** — Order! The minister has the call.

**Mr PAKULA** — You are implementing it in part.

**Mr WELLS** — No, I think there has been a misunderstanding.

**The CHAIR** — Order! Can we please not have exchanges across the table. The question has been asked, and the answer will be given.

**Mr WELLS** — The coalition has accepted all of the recommendations of the task force, and it has implemented a package of \$750 million over 10 years, which includes investment by the government of \$250 million under the Safer Electricity Assets Fund. The \$250 million is comprised of up to \$200 million for targeted replacement of some powerlines — that is over 1000 kilometres of powerlines — with underground or insulated overhead cables; \$40 million through the Local Infrastructure Assistance Fund to mitigate hardship concerns for vulnerable Victorians arising from powerlines and bushfire reduction measures; and \$10 million for further research and development of cost-effective ways to further reduce bushfire risk. The electricity distribution businesses will provide the remaining \$500 million for new safety equipment. This investment aims to reduce the risk of bushfires starting from power distribution assets by 64 per cent, so that is significant in those high-risk areas, whilst maintaining a reliable and affordable power supply. The plan reflects the government's commitment to improve safety, and we are continuing to do it.

If I could just point to what Neil Comrie said in regard to this — —

**Mr PAKULA** — On a point of order, Chair, I am not trying to be smart, but I asked the minister a question earlier about the fire services levy and he said he was unable to answer it because it was within the Treasurer's portfolio, but he seems well able to answer this question despite the fact that it is within the Minister for Energy and Resources' portfolio. I am just wondering as a matter of consistency why it is that the minister can answer questions in another portfolio when the question comes from a government member but not when it comes from me.

**Mr O'BRIEN** — On the point of order, Chair, just for the record, the minister did provide an answer to the earlier question. He just did not provide the Treasury details in the way that he answered it. So I think the suggestion that the minister is not being consistent is out of order.

**Members interjecting.**

**The CHAIR** — Order! We have a point of order. We will deal with it, thank you all. It is not for the chair to determine what is within or without a minister's portfolio. That is up to the minister, and obviously he will deal with questions as he sees fit, so I do not uphold the point of order.

**Members interjecting.**

**Mr WELLS** — I thought I was being very fair the way I handled the fire services levy.

**Members interjecting.**

**The CHAIR** — Thank you, Minister.

**Mr WELLS** — I just thought I was being very fair.

**Members interjecting.**

**Mr WELLS** — Thank you. Someone said it was a terrific answer.

**Members interjecting.**

**Mr WELLS** — I do not normally respond to interjections, but I thought it was a very fair interjection. Can I just say, on Mr Comrie's last report last year, he said in the recommendation:

... the powerline bushfire safety program will provide a comprehensive and effective response to the delivery of recommendation 27.

Which you said, Craig.

Comprehensive legal and regulatory timely policy response by the Government in addressing rec 32 and notes satisfactory implementation.

So it is a big ask but it is something that we are working on. I think there was some misunderstanding by some in the community, where they thought that the recommendation actually said that all powerlines should be underground, and that was not the recommendation of the bushfires royal commission.

**Mr PAKULA** — Minister, budget information paper 1, which is the rural and regional Victoria BIP, talks about the fire recovery unit. It describes it as being 'in Regional Development Victoria' and goes on to say that it 'was established on 1 July 2011 to assist fire-affected communities across Victoria' et cetera. Can you just tell us who is responsible for the fire recovery unit? Is it you as Minister for Bushfire Response or is it the Minister for Regional and Rural Development, who is the RDV minister, and I understand RDV is not within your portfolio responsibilities under the machinery-of-government provisions?

**Mr WELLS** — It is the responsibility of the Deputy Premier.

**Mr PAKULA** — I suppose my supplementary is simple: why would it be that the fire recovery unit would not have been transferred to you as the Minister for Bushfire Response, under the machinery-of-government

changes? It just seems logical that the Minister for Bushfire Response ought to have responsibility for the fire recovery unit.

**Members interjecting.**

**The CHAIR** — Order! I will call the minister to answer the question. I would have thought that questions on machinery of government were more appropriately addressed to the Premier, but I am happy to ask the minister to answer.

**Mr WELLS** — In fairness, that is the way I was going to answer the question: machinery-of-government changes between departments and ministers are the responsibility of the Premier.

**The CHAIR** — Mr Angus.

**Members interjecting.**

**Mr ANGUS** — The minister has answered the question. It is my turn.

**Mr PAKULA** — You have got two ministers with responsibility for fire recovery and you would expect that things might fall between the cracks, in those circumstances.

**Members interjecting.**

**The CHAIR** — Order! Mr Angus has the call.

**Mr ANGUS** — Minister, I refer also to budget information paper 1, page 27, that I referred to in my earlier question regarding the government's response to the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission, and I ask: can you advise the committee on the progress of the coalition government's commitment to introducing emergency sirens, particularly for Victorian communities threatened by bushfire, and what is the expected cost of the program over the forward estimates?

**Mr WELLS** — Having grown up in a bushfire area, in Bairnsdale, I know the system used to be in the old days that the CFA siren would ring and in those days the men of the town would then head down to the CFA, board the CFA trucks, and head out and fight fires. They could be gone for a couple of days or even up to a week. The system seemed to have worked pretty well, except that in those days you did not have the minimum skilling; you just relied on farming experience and other common sense. Today it is a different world and thank goodness we have minimum skilling. That was so appropriate in the question that Jill asked in regard to the Dereel fire. When you speak to those people who were caught up in that fire, they said, 'The training just kicked in. You didn't even have to think about it; the training was just absolutely appropriate'.

So you are right. In its report the bushfires royal commission recommended the use of sirens to alert communities to emergencies. The current guidelines were released in May 2012 by the fire services commissioner and he has been leading a pilot project in 39 high-risk Victorian communities over the past fire season. It should be realised that the sirens will not be suitable for all communities and are not a stand-alone warning system. In other words, people should not just rely on the sirens. They will obviously have the emergency alert system as well, and social media sites and websites and other items. When using a siren in the community, it is critical that integrated incident management procedures are used and that the local council, emergency management plans and other areas are dealing with this.

In regard to how the pilot is travelling, I might ask Craig, who is leading the pilot, to make comment.

**Comm. LAPSLEY** — We have now seen the review. We have actually published an evaluation report. It has been published just recently onto my fire services commissioner's website. It has been a very successful pilot, which will now allow us to take the next phase of where we now roll out sirens or connection with the CFA sirens for this purpose. I think the most important thing is that there are two purposes for the sirens. One, as Minister Wells has indicated, is to alert fire brigade members. That is not always used in all communities due to the fact that they have pager technology.

However, the second purpose for the sirens is where we are now not relying on the individual captain to push the button. It is now automated from the incident controller, that as they issue warnings to the telephones, to the

websites, the sirens also operate. So it is a systematic approach to improve our warning systems. It has been a huge success in the communities that we have installed them in. They are used primarily in the Dandenongs and in some other isolated locations, but a systematic approach is the method and it has been extremely well received by community members.

**Mr SCOTT** — Minister, I would like to take you back to the affected communities and I would like to turn to Kinglake, again in the context of the fire recovery unit that I referred to earlier. You may be aware that the Kinglake youth group was set up in the months after the Black Saturday fires. It provides vital services for young people in the area who have been affected by the fires — reconnecting them with family, friends, education and employment. The funding for the Kinglake youth group coordinator has been cut, and I would like you to explain what the rationale is for that cut.

**Mr WELLS** — Thanks, Robin, for your question. I actually met with the people concerned, with the youth group in Kinglake, about four or five weeks ago. They put to me a number of concerns, and my office is following through because they did point out that funding had been cut for one of the youth leaders. Obviously we will follow that through, and I am happy to report that back to the committee, but we need to go through a process. The committee needs to be assured that I have met with them. It was a short conversation, but an assurance was given to the two women who we met with that my office would follow up their concerns. We will work through that process if that is a fair way of handling it, but I am happy to report back to the committee.

**The CHAIR** — It is on notice, but not a formal — —

**Mr WELLS** — I am happy to put it on notice and for us to follow it up, because we did actually meet and gave a commitment that we would follow this through.

**Mr SCOTT** — If it is taken on notice, will you specifically respond to whether the funding will be restored to the community group for that coordinating position?

**Mr WELLS** — Yes, that is the commitment that is given. I might say that we also gave a commitment to the people that we met that we would be following through.

**Mr O'BRIEN** — Thank you, Minister, for a previous answer. I would like to place on record my thanks for and the importance of the training facility at Penshurst, for example, where training for a number of those trainees that you referred to is conducted. I would like to ask you a question in relation to the bushfires royal commission and the government's commitment to implementing all 67 recommendations of the royal commission. In regard to recommendation 3 regarding the protection of vulnerable persons in emergency situations, can you advise this committee on how effective the program is, and what will be the cost of the program over the forward estimates?

**Mr WELLS** — Thanks, David, I guess some people who live in the city do not have the worry if their parents are also in the city, but if their parents are living in high bushfire areas, you would want to have an understanding or a commitment from community leaders and agencies that if a fire danger period was taking place, there was a system in place that meant people who are bound in wheelchairs, who are frail and elderly, who choose to live where they live were going to be well compensated and looked after appropriately. As you mentioned, recommendation 3 proposes that the state establish mechanisms to help councils undertake local planning and to compile a list of vulnerable residents who require tailored advice to evacuate.

Once again let me say that this government is committed to implementing the 67 recommendations, and this one is of particular importance. Substantial efforts have been made to increase emergency planning with and for vulnerable people during emergencies. The program received \$10.4 million, in answer to your questions in regard to setting it up, in the 2012–13 budget, and that is being implemented by the departments of health and human services. What the program does is allow proactive emergency planning at council and community/individual level to support vulnerable people to set up a register so they can be contacted at a time of high fire danger or whether it be flood. The establishment of a web-based vulnerable persons register was a key element of this program. It is now live and accessible to Victoria Police as of April this year.

The program has also included funding from council to build and support that local council capacity. The government recognises the importance of local people being able to use this, and it is about looking after

families, it is looking after neighbours and people on farming properties just to make sure that when something is happening there is that greater commitment to be able to look after people in need, especially those who are living in high fire danger areas. I am not sure if Craig wants to add something to that.

**Comm. LAPSLEY** — I think it is one of the most fundamental steps we have made. It has been very difficult. It is not easy to identify who those community members are, so to bring them forward is it. The initial step was where we had a list of lists, so that was the list of who knew where they were. We have now been able to enhance that to provide a structured approach to it which the 64 municipalities that are primarily in the CFA's area have been able to put in place. We will now look at what it means outside of bushfire, because it was built around bushfire — what it means for broader than that of bushfire. It is a huge success and it has some improvement steps yet to be had.

**Ms HENNESSY** — I want to ask a question around the extension of the summer fire campaign, which is referenced at budget paper 3, page 31. Minister, you obviously know that people in high bushfire risk communities are being educated to prepare and to act in the event of a fire, and part of that message has been to encourage people to be aware of what is going on in their own local community. But last summer there were numerous reports about the failure of the CFA website to adequately keep people up to date on the threat of fire in their local area. The complaints ranged from things like inaccurate information being posted on the website through to people being unable to log onto the website or the website slowing dramatically due to increased traffic on high fire risk days. What steps are you taking to ensure that these failures will not occur again in the coming fire season? What would you rely upon in order to assure these communities who felt pretty frustrated and in some cases quite frightened by the failure to be able to get accurate information?

**Mr WELLS** — I think the question is an appropriate question. I think it is a very important question. When you have high fire danger, people want information. People want information that is accurate and in a timely manner. We have had situations over the last few months where that has simply not been the case. The fire services commissioner and I have discussed this matter. He is dealing with it, and I have been given assurances that this will be fixed. If I could pass to the fire services commissioner, who is leading the rebuild and fixing the issue that was there that Jill has raised previously.

**Comm. LAPSLEY** — One of the key things is the fact that we have changed the control priorities about the way in which our fire controllers operate to make sure that there is timely, tailored and relevant information going out to the community. Obviously our mechanism to get that was challenged this year. It was one of the most frustrating days on 4 January when we found that we had a surge of community need to access information and both our FireReady app and our primary website struggled. We took steps over the summer period to rectify that, but we have been very clear that we have to rethink and rebuild, and we are in that process now to completely turn around what it is.

It also tells you that the community is different. The community is now running on mobile devices, hand devices, and we did not have the agility to be able to cater for those surge capacities. That is not an excuse; that is a reality. I think the words 'rethink and rebuild' are where we are. We will have in place for this summer season a new FireReady application, and we are rebuilding the website to be a website that will cater for the community's needs.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you. That question concludes the bushfire response hearing. I thank the minister and the gentlemen at the table for their attendance here today. Where questions were taken on notice, the committee will follow up with you in writing at a later date. I think there were two in the police and emergency services portfolio and one most recently in terms of bushfire response. We ask that written responses where possible — that last one relating to Kinglake may fall outside the 21 days, but if at all possible a 21-day response will enable timely reporting to the Parliament. That concludes the hearing.

**Witnesses withdrew.**