



AUTUMN 2026

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Brigade



**January
fires impact
communities
across the state**

PLUS: Fire Services Museum ● A new era for Keysborough ● Good Friday Appeal

IN THIS ISSUE

Brigade magazine is published by CFA Communications & Stakeholder Relations, PO Box 701, Mt Waverley VIC

Manager Member Communication and Engagement: Brad Thomas

Editor: Duncan Russell
duncan.russell@cfa.vic.gov.au
0428 907 053

Graphic designer: John Knight

Printer: IVE Group

Articles reflect the opinions of the authors and not necessarily those of CFA.

The editor reserves the right to amend articles.

You can update your address or email details or cancel *Brigade* magazine by clicking on 'manage my profile' on the home page of members.cfa.vic.gov.au or by calling 1800 628 844.

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We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the Traditional Custodians of the land. We pay our respects to Elders, past and present.

COVER IMAGE: WAYNE RIGG AFSM
MAIN CONTENTS PAGE IMAGE: KEITH PAKENHAM AFSM

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CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER



Jason Heffernan

CHIEF OFFICER

Back in mid-2025 as we were turning our minds to the 2025-26 high-risk weather season the predictive intelligence was highlighting many parts of the state would experience a significant number of high-risk weather days. Victoria had the lowest-on-record 18-month rainfall in many areas, autumn was extremely dry, and rain in June and July across parts of the state did not affect the historically dry lower level soils in many of those areas.

Across CFA, we started to get ready. The release of the Chief Officer's Command Intent Statement in early October was accompanied by bringing forward the Service Delivery Preparedness Program. We staged a statewide Get Fire Ready initiative in October to strengthen community awareness of fire risk and the practical steps people can take to prepare their properties. It was fantastic that more than 500 brigades across the state took part, with the majority of events held in higher fire-risk areas. The events directly engaged more than 40,000 community members with many more reached through fire safety mailouts and advertising.

Supplemental funding of \$10.6 million was secured for bulk water and fuel, and the project team quickly stood up these arrangements across 19 nominated operating bases. These sites have helped reduce travel time for water replenishment, supported staging areas and reduced usage of critical community water supplies. So far, there has been more than 1,000 hours of operations of bulk water contractors, notably improving the efficiency of firefighting operations.

As we write this column, many people are still coming to grips with the devastating impacts of fires which commenced in early January, and there are more challenges ahead this

season. There has been a tragic level of destruction and loss. Many of our own members have lost homes and businesses while out defending their communities. Our thoughts are with them and we continue to offer support as they embark on the process of recovery.

We continue to be proud of the dedication, heroism and professionalism of our people. Hundreds of homes, properties and businesses were saved through the tireless efforts of our members, working alongside crews from other Victorian agencies, and from interstate and overseas. Statewide, staff continue to show focus and dedication in helping ensure volunteers and senior operational leaders have the information, equipment and support services they rely on.

As with any busy fire season there are lessons to be learned, improvements to be made and new initiatives to be evaluated. This is the first season for our Remote Area Firefighting Team and the bulk water/fuel initiative, and we have been using our remotely piloted aircraft systems in extended ways this year.

Debriefing and after-action reviews (AARs) are essential elements of the continuous learning cycle. Across the organisation there are many AARs already underway with many still to be undertaken. We appreciate the contributions of everyone who will participate in these activities overcoming months.

Across CFA, every volunteer and staff member is playing their part in this effort, and the organisation can only protect the Victorian community because we all pull together when it counts.

We thank you all.

Shane Keen

GROUP OFFICER, D08



As I reflect on my 18 years serving as Casey group officer, I'm reminded of just how much our district has transformed. When I first stepped into the role, Casey was already a busy and dynamic part of Victoria, but the scale of growth since then has been extraordinary.

Today, our area has expanded tenfold and is one of the fastest-growing municipalities in the state.

Our group of 11 brigades covers an area of incredible diversity. North of Cranbourne is dominated by dense residential development and significant industrial hubs, while the southern end opens into rural landscapes punctuated by pockets of industry. This brings a unique blend of challenges and opportunities, requiring our brigades to be skilled and prepared for anything.

Casey Group has also been shaped by major events that have left a lasting mark on our members and our community. Our group was heavily impacted by the 2009 fires, with multiple significant incidents in Narre Warren South and Narre Warren North. Tragically, a number of homes were lost, and the emotional toll on our brigades and community was immense. It took a long time for us to recover from the devastation that confronted us.

As I write this, we are facing another challenging fire season. It's a sobering reminder of the importance of preparedness, resilience and strong leadership.

Over the years, Casey Group has continued to evolve. Training has become a major pillar of what we do. We take great pride in delivering a wide range of group-level courses that ensure our members are equipped

with the skills and confidence needed to respond safely and effectively in an ever-changing environment.

Operationally, our role continues to be centred on supporting brigades on the fireground – providing the resources, coordination and leadership they need to carry out their work. Our primary goal has always been, and remains, to offer strong leadership and unwavering support to our brigades so they can deliver the highest level of service.

Clear, honest communication is essential to achieve this. As a group, we strive to keep open channels of information between the district and our brigades. We also see ourselves as advocates – ensuring that the needs, concerns and accomplishments of our brigades are heard and understood at district level.

Serving as group officer has been both an honour and a privilege. My focus has always been on supporting the group and fostering an environment where our members can thrive. I look forward to seeing the next generation of leaders emerge – men and women who will uphold CFA's proud traditions and continue the commitment to serve our community with professionalism, courage and heart.



January fires hit communities hard



This fire season has placed sustained demand on Victoria's fire and emergency services. Across the state, CFA members have met that demand head on.

Between 7 January and 15 February, CFA responded to more than 7,146 individual incidents.

More than 1,100 brigades were involved, members turned out more than 81,500 times and 2,500 vehicles were deployed.

Many members responded multiple times while balancing employment, farming operations, family and community commitments, all during the longest duration heatwave event Victoria has experienced since 2009.

As of mid-February, more than 1,500 structures have been damaged or destroyed and about 436,300 hectares of land burned, amid 27 Total Fire Ban days, compared with only 12 for the entire 2024-25 season.

Encouragingly, CFA has received more than 2,900 expressions of interest from prospective new volunteers since 7 January.

Significant fires on 9 January 2026

On 9 January, catastrophic fire conditions led to multiple fires flaring in quick succession across the state.

A statewide Total Fire Ban was declared for Victoria, with temperatures exceeding 40 degrees Celsius in many parts of the state and strong, gusty winds, following two days of extreme heat. The risk was further heightened by dry lightning.

The South West, Wimmera, Northern Country and North Central fire weather districts were all rated as Catastrophic on 9 January, and all other districts were Extreme fire danger.

It was one of the most operationally demanding days for some time, with CFA crews attending almost 200 grass and scrub fires in a single day and more than 80 strike teams mobilised.

Given the widespread impact of the fires, a State of Disaster was declared in 18 local government areas and one alpine resort.

The 2026 Victorian Bushfire Appeal is open for people wanting to donate to fire-affected communities: vic.gov.au/2026-Victorian-Bushfire-Appeal.

**JANUARY FIRES
IN NUMBERS**

Since December 2025
CFA has distributed:

300,000

Water bottles

157,000

Hydration sticks

28,000

Masks

19,000

Ration packs

5,005

Pairs of gloves

3,524

Goggles

1,644

Wildfire pants

1,628

Wildfire coats

661

Wildfire helmets

Longwood-Berrys Lane

When catastrophic conditions arrived on 9 January, the Berrys Lane fire was already established in steep and inaccessible terrain. For Ruffy Fire Brigade Captain George Noye and his members the impact began the day before.

“The fire impacted our area on the 8th,” George said. “By the time the catastrophic conditions hit on the 9th, we were already dealing with an established fire in very challenging country.

“Once the fire started jumping from one hilltop to another, it was clear we were dealing with something beyond anything we could directly suppress in those conditions.”

“The terrain was incredibly challenging, access was limited and communications were difficult. In many areas there was little to no phone reception, which made coordination on the ground extremely hard.”

Despite suppression efforts, the fire ran hard on two fronts, one toward Tarcombe and another flanking toward Ruffy, jumping the road at Ponkeen and impacting Ruffy at around 2pm. George said that during the early stages of the escalation, crews were operating with limited resources.

“It was Ruffy tanker 1 and Ruffy 2, along with private appliances and a local grader assisting with asset protection breaks in the southern sector around Ponkeen Creek Road, working together in those initial stages,” he said.

“A strike team reached us later on which strengthened the response. The support that followed was extraordinary – from across CFA and from interstate. Seeing where crews came from and how much support eventually arrived meant a great deal to our brigade and community.

“Alexandra FFMVic crews, alongside Keith’s Excavations, put in breaks and protected key assets within the town, saving the fire station and the hall,” George said.

“Ruffy members who were available supported asset protection efforts while conditions on the fire line forced crews to reposition.”

Overall, more than 400 firefighting personnel were involved in the response, supported by over 100 vehicles. The fire ultimately burnt more than 130,000 hectares, destroyed 320 homes, damaged a further 19, and impacted 859 outbuildings. Tragically, one person lost their life.

Natimuk

Seventeen homes were destroyed and a further 18 outbuildings were impacted by the Mitre-Grass Flat Rd Natimuk fire on 9 January. The fire ignited approximately 14 kilometres west of Natimuk and reached the township within an hour, fuelled by gusts exceeding 100 kilometres per hour.

CFA District 17 Acting Commander Scott Connor said conditions were the most severe he had experienced on the fireground. “The fire behaviour we saw on 9 January was extreme from the outset,” Scott said.

“Direct attack simply wasn’t possible early on, such was the ferocity of the fire. Crews adapted quickly, prioritising the protection of homes and key infrastructure as conditions worsened.”

More than 27 local CFA brigades responded, supported by Fire Rescue Victoria, Forest Fire Management Victoria, strike teams from South Australia, council resources and specialist tankers.

“This wasn’t just a CFA effort. The way agencies worked together significantly strengthened our capability on the day,” Scott said.

Local farmers also played a critical role, using machinery to construct firebreaks ahead of the fire.

“Their rapid action made a real difference,” Scott said. “Without that community effort, the impact could have been far greater.”

IMAGE: WAYNE RIGG AFSM



Carlisle River

Carlisle River Fire Brigade commended the extraordinary efforts of firefighters and support crews following sustained fire activity throughout the Otways region throughout January and February.

For many local volunteer firefighters, the response came with an added emotional toll as they protected the community while worrying about their own families and properties.

Carlisle River Fire Brigade Captain Rob May said his crews faced incredibly challenging circumstances.

“Our members were jumping on the truck to protect the community while knowing their own homes were at risk. That’s a hard position to be in, but they didn’t hesitate to turn out and help,” Rob said.

Burning in challenging, heavily forested terrain, the fire proved difficult to contain and ultimately burned 11,721 hectares, with evacuation warnings issued ahead of extreme conditions forecast for 27 January.

Streatham

The Streatham-Yalla-Y-Poora Rd fire in Victoria’s mid-west destroyed 18 homes and a total of 59 structures, burning almost 20,000 hectares between Streatham and Skipton before being contained on 11 January.

Incident Controller Chris Eagle said early decisions on the fireground played a critical role as conditions deteriorated quickly.

“An early decision by the Westmere Group to establish Willaura Local Command Facility as a divisional control point allowed us to manage the scale of the incident more effectively as it escalated,” Chris said.

“District 16 resources were rapidly increased, supported by a large number of private appliances, and strike teams from outside the region were deployed quickly relative to our requests.”

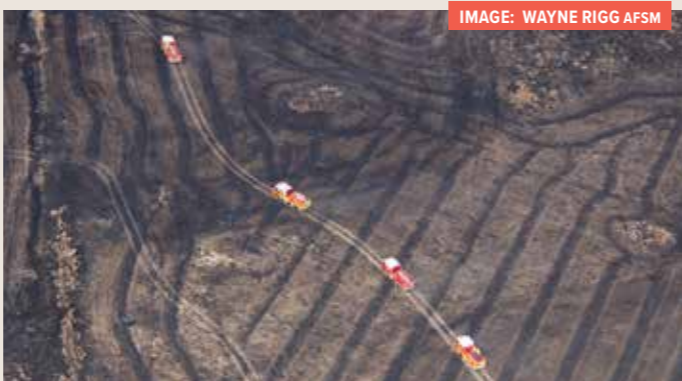
Strong winds initially ruled out aircraft support, and when aircraft were able to operate several hours later heavy smoke and poor visibility limited their effectiveness.

“Given the speed of the fire, warnings were issued across a broad area ahead of a predicted wind change to give residents as much time as possible to enact their fire plans or leave,” Chris said.

“While the wind change did not ultimately drive the fire in the anticipated direction, the community responded to the advice.”



IMAGE: WAYNE RIGG AFSM



In the days that followed, crews focused on extensive mop-up, treating hazardous trees along roadsides, extinguishing hotspots in unburnt paddocks, and patrolling peat and stump fires in swampy areas.

Firefighters also worked closely with partner agencies, including Powercor, to support community recovery.

At the peak of the response, about 80 CFA trucks and an estimated 70 private vehicles were on the fireground.

“This is a well-connected community that understands fire,” Chris said.

“While there were significant losses, many properties were saved through preparation and the efforts of landowners, neighbours and firefighters working together.”

Harcourt

The small town of Harcourt, a few kilometres north-east of Castlemaine, was severely impacted by the Ravenswood South fire on 9 January.

Starting on Fogartys Gap Road, the fire travelled south and destroyed more than 50 homes and several businesses.

Harcourt Fire Brigade Captain Andrew Wilson said his crews were at the forefront of the firefight and spent days protecting the community.

“We went hard on the fires for four days. Everyone’s been pretty busy,” Andrew said.

In the weeks following the fire, Harcourt brigade received a number of new enquiries about volunteering at the brigade.

Local resident Michael Pilcher is one of the many Victorians who expressed interest in volunteering with CFA since the fire. He said watching how CFA supported the town made him want to help.

“Seeing how many people came together to support our small town really stood out. It took a huge number of volunteers, and the level of commitment from CFA members was incredible,” Michael said.



Other significant fires on 9 January included those in Walwa, Wonnangatta, multiple fires in the Alpine National Park (49,900 hectares) and in Mount Mercer (2,200 hectares).

Larralea (27 January)

Firefighters were praised for their rapid response to the Larralea bushfire, which broke out under extreme fire danger conditions at about 1.15pm on 27 January.

More than 300 firefighters from CFA and Forest Fire Management Victoria, supported by more than 60 vehicles and aircraft, worked swiftly to slow the spread of the fire and protect nearby communities. Despite challenging conditions, including 40 degree temperatures, the fire was brought under control at 11.20am on 28 January, less than 24 hours after it started.

Incident Controller Dave Stephens said the blaze escalated quickly once it was reported, with crews facing difficult conditions from the outset.

“The early challenge was the heat, the conditions and the toll that takes on firefighters, equipment and machinery,” Dave said.

“It was a tough day but crews moved quickly to get on top of it.”

Dave said the strong outcome was the result of a coordinated effort between firefighters, partner agencies and the local community.

“I’m incredibly proud of how quickly crews were able to bring this fire under control given the conditions,” Dave said. “Firefighters were supported by firefighting aircraft and by local landowners who worked alongside CFA and Forest Fire Management Victoria with graders and equipment.

“It really was a strong, coordinated effort.”

If at any time you are concerned about your own wellbeing or the wellbeing of someone you know, support is always available. By calling **1800 959 232** members can access a range of services including Member Assistance, Peer Support and the Chaplaincy Program.

FMR pre-positioned to support firefighters

Ahead of the catastrophic fire danger on 9 January, a trial was initiated involving a number of Fire Medical Response (FMR) trained CFA members. They were pre-positioned across the state to support firefighters who were expected to operate for extended periods in extreme heat.

Crews were deployed from 8 January to Horsham, Ballarat, Shepparton, Mansfield and Seymour, following consultation with senior operational leaders including state and regional agency commanders and district duty officers. These locations were selected to provide broad coverage across high-risk areas and to support crews likely to be operating under sustained heat stress.

Factors used to determine the locations included fire in the landscape, forecast weather conditions and elevated Fire Behaviour Index levels, the availability of private medical providers and which agency was managing incidents in each area. Weather conditions, particularly forecast Fire Behaviour Index levels, were the primary trigger for pre-positioning the service.

Districts were encouraged to deploy this capability where crews were expected to be working for prolonged periods in extreme heat, or where additional health monitoring and rehabilitation support was likely to be required.



During the heatwave conditions in January, the trial provided assistance to more than 40 firefighters affected by heat. While there were challenges due to the minimal time taken to organise these deployments and a lack of formal doctrine, many key stakeholders have provided positive feedback on the trial and its prospects for the future.

Deputy Chief Officer Garry Cook AFSM said the trial had positive outcomes.

“There were clear benefits to be realised with forward placement of suitably trained crews on these extremely hot days during January,” Garry said.

“We will review the success through the after-action review process and we know we will require clear doctrine to be developed for future operations, and further understanding in the field will help mitigate the challenges encountered with managing these resources.”

From an operational perspective, Berwick Fire Brigade Captain Craig Sanderson said the deployment was a positive step forward.

“Activating medical response crews to assist on the fireground is new to CFA and I’m pleased it was deployed and used as intended. The crews found it very rewarding to be able to assist other CFA personnel as well as others in need,” Craig said.



CFA arduous firefighters

CFA’s newly formed Remote Arduous Firefighting (RAFF) unit is officially in action. Following rigorous training, the pilot program officially kicked off on 1 January. Since that time, the unit has already been deployed seven times to various fires across the state.

The unit’s first deployment was to the Ovens region in early January, where they worked directly with Forest Fire Management Victoria crews. The joint deployment gave both agencies an opportunity to better understand each other’s capabilities, expertise, training and equipment as they undertook vital fire suppression.

Shortly after returning from their first response, the CFA RAFF unit was deployed to Meredith. Once again working with Forest Fire Management Victoria, arduous firefighter teams from both agencies created control lines in remote areas not accessible by vehicle or machinery.

Read more about the arduous firefighters on page 30.

Bulk water carrier deployments

The January fires saw CFA’s bulk water carriers continue their vital support, following four deployments in December.

Operating from 19 bases across Victoria as part of the Elevated Seasonal Response Initiative (ESRI), the mobile water tankers hold more than 20,000 litres of water and are strategically positioned in drought-impacted regions.

To date, the carriers have logged over 1,121 operational hours supporting firegrounds across the state and have supported more than 30 incidents.

Read more about the bulk water tankers on page 34.

Thanking employers

Throughout January, the incredible work of CFA volunteers was made possible because employers across Victoria allowed staff the flexibility to leave work and/or adjust schedules, while some volunteers elected to step away from their own businesses to protect communities.

Many volunteers turned out repeatedly, with some deployed for extended periods or returning to incidents after already completing full work days.

Chief Officer Jason Heffernan said the contribution of employers does not go unnoticed.

“When employers release volunteers to respond to emergencies, they are directly contributing to the safety and resilience of their local community,” Jason said.

CFA thanks the employers who continue to stand behind their volunteers when communities need them most.

STORY JAMES TAYLOR



Interstate and international deployments

Victorian fire crews did not stand alone during the January bushfires.

Hundreds of emergency personnel from across Australia and overseas supported Victoria’s emergency services, joining the state’s bushfire response and recovery efforts.

Victorian emergency services were bolstered by more than 550 firefighters and incident management teams.

A total of 460 personnel from almost every Australian state and territory were deployed to Victoria, joined by 22 arduous firefighters from New Zealand and 74 personnel from Canada.

They joined the thousands of responders from CFA and partner agencies including Forest Fire Management Victoria, Fire Rescue Victoria and Victoria State Emergency Service.

UPDATE ON CFA PROJECTS

In each edition of the magazine we update members with the progress on some of our key projects. More information about all our projects is on Members Online: members.vic.gov.au/CFAprojects

Child Safety

We’re currently refreshing the Child Safety Risk Assessment form to make it easier to use, quicker to complete and more accessible for everyone. The new version will help reduce paperwork and make assessments more consistent across the organisation. We expect to start testing the updated form in March or April 2026. We’re also updating our child safety training courses on the Learning Hub. The new courses will be more practical, engaging, up to date, and help volunteers and staff feel confident in spotting and responding to child safety concerns. These refreshed courses are planned for release in the second half of 2026.



Fire Medical Response (FMR)

The final brigades will be enrolled in the FMR training program by April 2026. We will continue to deliver education and reaccreditation training for those brigades already operational in the program.

The FMR team is currently undertaking a large-scale review of FMR training content, which is planned to be completed by April 2026. Also, the non-firefighting pathway into FMR is being created.



Breathing apparatus cylinder exchange

Brigades want increased flexibility and convenience when refilling used BA cylinders. The BA Cylinder Swap and Go app has been completed, learning materials have been developed and a pilot is underway in District 11. Some valuable lessons have been gathered and minor enhancements are being made to the app. When the pilot is complete, the app and associated process will be rolled out to further districts.



Mobile data capability

This project is equipping volunteers with timely information so they can serve their communities more effectively. At the end of 2024, 93 per cent of docks and brackets had been installed in vehicles. More than 950 tablets had also been successfully installed and configured. Production support handover documentation has been completed. By April 2026 all docks and tablets will be installed and support activities will become business as usual.



Work is now underway on future equipment ordering and changing support processes across different towers.

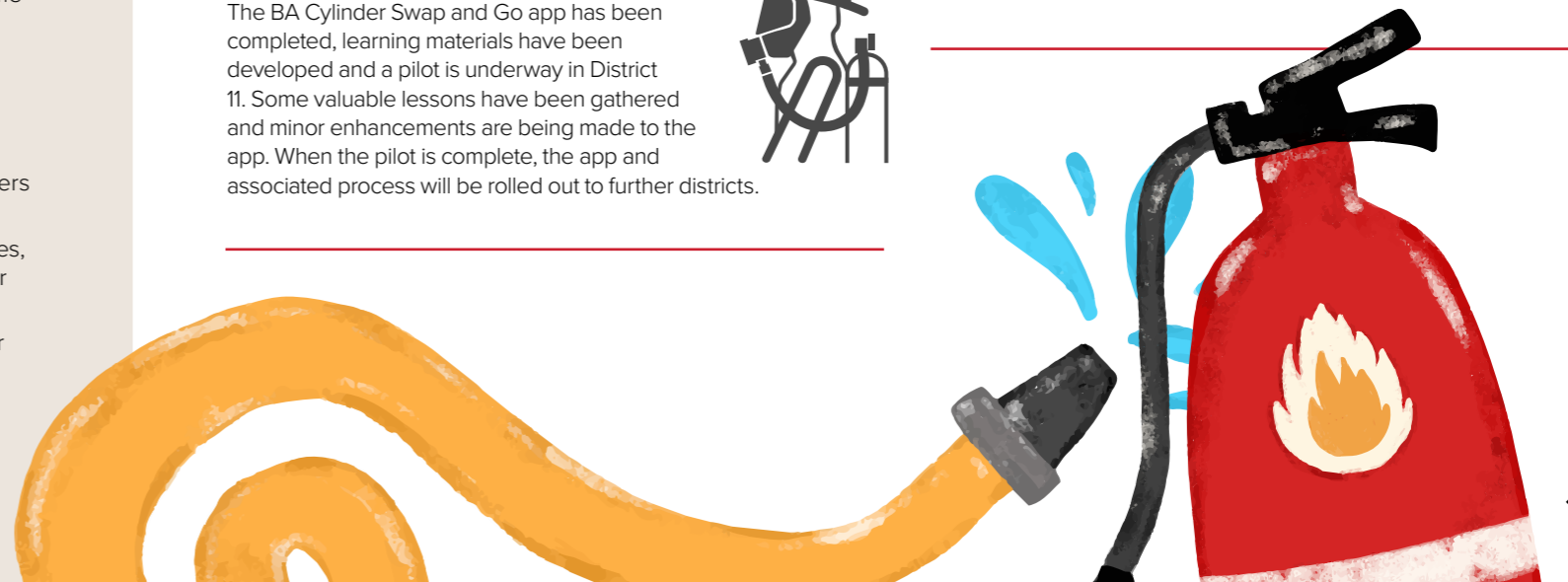
Driver training

Rectification works have begun on the off-road driver training track at VEMTC Longerenong. Twenty-two off-road courses have been scheduled and 16 completed. Thirty on-road courses have been scheduled and 29 completed.



We are also building a driving simulator and trailer prototype, and updating to the Driver Educator course.

We will continue to deliver heavy vehicle driving licences and driving courses to members.



Time to shape CFA's future membership model



Have you heard? We're enhancing the CFA volunteer membership model to make it clearer, more flexible and more supportive of the way volunteers live, work and contribute. This shapes how people join, stay and contribute at CFA both now and for years to come.

Through the Contemporary Volunteer Membership Model (CVMM) Options Paper, we're testing our members' support for 13 recommended options before decisions are made. Member feedback will determine which options progress and what we can do to implement changes sensibly.

You can give your feedback on Members Online (members.cfa.vic.gov.au/CFAprojects) and copies of the Options Paper have been sent to every brigade, so look out for a hard copy.



"The introduction of seasonal status is another significant step forward... an initiative our region has requested for many years."
 – DGO West Region

Why the change?

These options have been developed in response to member feedback over many years that some elements of the current membership framework can place unnecessary burdens on some members and brigades.

This is our opportunity to refine current arrangements to improve retention, support brigades and be a more attractive proposition to the widest possible cohorts in our communities.

What we're asking

- Which options should be supported, changed or not progressed?
- What risks or implementation issues do we need to consider?
- What would help brigades adopt any approved changes successfully?

We've extended the time to have your say

Recognising the ongoing impacts of this summer's fire activity and the incredible response already from our committed volunteers, the volunteer membership model surveys will remain open for feedback until at least the end of April.

Whether or not you complete the online survey, you can also email a written submission direct to CFA at cvmm@cfa.vic.gov.au

HAVE YOUR SAY

All members

- Read the Options Paper and reflect on the recommended options. Will this benefit me? Will it benefit other members?
- Speak to your BMT member or VFBV representative about any questions you have.
- Actively promote discussion at your brigade about the Options Paper.
- Scan the QR code (right) with your phone and complete the Individual Member Survey.

Volunteer leaders

- Read the Options Paper as a representative body about how the recommended options will provide better support for brigades. Will it help brigades to better attract, support and retain volunteers?
- Actively promote discussion at your brigades and meetings about the Options Paper and ways to increase members' participation in the surveys.
- Scan the QR code (right) to complete the Volunteer Leader Survey for your representative body.



Read the CVMM Paper:

WHAT'S BEING PROPOSED?

New member subcategories: Firefighter, Cadet, Specialist, Life member, Brigade support

<p>Recruitment and induction tailored and fit for role</p>	<p>Greater support for transferring members</p>	<p>Clearer, defined capabilities and pathways to roles</p>	<p>Greater clarity about HQ brigades</p>
<p>Seasonal/reserve status</p> <p>For members living outside a CFA brigade area to assist in peak periods as a firefighter or specialist</p>	<p>Dual/multi membership</p> <p>To allow members to perform the same role in different brigades, or different roles across brigades</p>	<p>Policies for:</p> <p>Casual firefighters Volunteer auxiliary workers Spontaneous volunteering</p>	<p>Read the CVMM Paper:</p>

WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING SO FAR:

Many members and leaders have already had their say.

68%

Are more likely to refer a family member, friend or colleague to join CFA

73%

Say that the proposed **General Member** sub-categories will provide new opportunities for them personally to contribute or develop their capabilities as a CFA volunteer

TOP PRIORITIES

- Recommendation 1** – Tailored recruitment and induction for member sub-categories and roles
- Recommendation 3** – Well-defined capabilities with clear pathways
- Recommendation 10** – A well-defined and structured membership model framework

WE WANT YOUR FEEDBACK

AGREE? DON'T AGREE? TAKE THE SURVEY!

Be heard, get involved and share what you think about the options. Scan the QR code to take the survey.



WHERE TO FIND MORE:

Find a hard copy of the Options Paper at your brigade or visit Members Online.

"Good initiative. It's pleasing to see CFA thinking creatively and adapting to the changing needs of the community." – South West Region

Primary students say thank you



More than 100 primary students from Colac and Beac dropped into Beac Fire Station in early February to say thank you to CFA volunteers for their hard work and service this fire season.

The contingent of Grade 3 and 5 students from Colac's St Mary's Primary School and Beac Primary School beamed into the station with energy and enthusiasm, with countless handcrafted thank you posters.

The bright red and orange posters with impressive firefighting drawings and words of gratitude became the backdrop of the day, with a mural-like spectacle decorating the station roller doors.

The idea to pay tribute was floated by a Grade 1 student, Eileen Reid, daughter of Beac Fire Brigade Firefighter Peter Reid.

"Eileen saw a sign that someone had painted on the way into Colac thanking CFA volunteers, and she suggested to me that they should do the same at school," Peter said.

"She mentioned it when I dropped her off on her first day, so I spoke to Principal Michael Mahoney that afternoon and he thought it was a great idea and said he would look into it.

"He started off with seven kids in two cars coming down, before it climbed to 30 and eventually 100."

Throughout the morning, several students had the opportunity to express verbally how proud they were of the firefighters and thanked them for their efforts.

A group of students tasked the firefighters with some hard-hitting questions about their response to recent fires, how families can be

more fire safe at home, what it feels like to be on a truck and how the equipment works.

Peter said it was a fantastic morning and a wonderful event for the community, and brigade members were grateful that Chief Officer Jason Heffernan and District 6 Assistant Chief Fire Officer Peter Lockwood joined in on the day.

"The kids were really engaged and wanted to find out more about what we did and what it takes to be a firefighter," Peter said.

"Like many of the kids, I can see the passion in Eileen. When my pager goes off in the middle of the night, she wakes up too and says, 'Daddy go get the fire!'"

The appreciation of the children followed the brigade members' deployments on several strike teams across the south-west throughout January, particularly in the Otways.

"We had three or four strike teams and a couple of swing shifts in Carlisle River, Irrewillipe and Gellibrand over recent weeks," Peter said.

"We also supported Cressy, Derrinallum and Noorat on the extreme fire days, and on one high-risk day we were stationed at Lismore to protect the township in case something happened."

The budding future firefighters finished the morning with ice cream and fruit, plenty of high fives and photos with Captain Koala, and a climb through a CFA truck.

STORY LUCY BISHOP

CFA members receive Australian Fire Service Medals

On Australia Day 2026 five highly regarded CFA members were awarded the prestigious Australian Fire Service Medal (AFSM), in recognition of their outstanding service to CFA and their communities.

The five members have been recognised for their exceptional bravery, expertise and leadership, leading their regions through major emergencies such as Ash Wednesday, the 2009 fires and the 2019-20 bushfire season, while also advocating for modern and innovative development across CFA's fleet, training, recruitment and equipment to enhance capabilities.

THE 2026 CFA AUSTRALIAN FIRE SERVICE MEDAL RECIPIENTS



EMMA CONWAY

BRENDAN BLAKE

GARTH JOHNSON

KELVIN BATEMAN

GAVIN PARKER

Emma embodies the highest standards of service, integrity and leadership. With an impressive 21-year career at CFA, she has demonstrated unwavering dedication as both a volunteer and a career firefighter. Her exceptional leadership during major emergencies, strong commitment to volunteer and workforce development, and passionate advocacy for inclusion and diversity set her apart as a remarkable role model.

Brendan has dedicated more than 54 years to CFA, serving in key leadership roles across multiple brigades, notably during major fires including Ash Wednesday, the 2009 fires and the 2019-20 bushfires, and pioneering the design of modern fire trucks. A strong advocate for leadership development, Brendan has mentored countless firefighters, promoted female recruitment and championed succession planning.

Garth has been a volunteer for more than 40 years, holding several frontline roles. He now primarily serves at Langwarrin brigade as the 1st Lieutenant. Garth helped develop the state's first rescue unit and improved road rescue training. Passionate about mental health, he now shares his personal experience to raise awareness and encourage others to seek help, making a significant impact on fellow firefighters.

Kelvin's contributions to CFA have spanned more than 46 years, serving as captain of Dunrobin-Nangeela brigade for 32 years and holding various roles in VFBV, including Board member. As 2nd deputy group officer of the Casterton Group, he is held in high regard for his integrity and fair approach and leadership. Many volunteers turn to him for support in times of need.

Gavin began his service with CFA as a volunteer in 1976 and transitioned to a career firefighter in 1995. Over almost five decades he has held key leadership roles, mostly in the Latrobe Valley and South East Region, and during the 2009 Black Saturday and 2019-20 bushfires. Gavin has made a lasting impact through innovation, pioneering the use of thermal imaging cameras (TIC) and developing TIC training drills. This work has earned him international recognition.

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Chief Officer Jason Heffernan congratulated the five highly respected AFSM recipients for their invaluable service to CFA and the Victorian community.

"CFA is incredibly proud of its volunteers and staff, and it is great to see our members recognised with the highest fire service medal in the country," Jason said. "We are fortunate to have so many incredible people who devote a large part of their life to the protection of lives and property in their communities, and I thank them for their dedication."

CFA would also like to recognise AFSM recipient and Fire Rescue Victoria Commander Graham Kirk AFSM, who has also contributed significantly to CFA and Victoria's fire services.

Another eight former and current CFA members were awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM): Elizabeth Bate, Beverley Edwards, Ian Kellett, Major Neil Leckie, Geoffrey Penny, Graeme Robb, Gordon Simpson and Christine Welsh.

To read more about the AFSM recipients use this QR code.



Preserving the history of firefighting



Step inside the historic building in Melbourne and you'll be greeted by Australia's largest collection of firefighting memorabilia, including CFA exhibits dating back almost two centuries.

From horse-drawn appliances used in the 1800s, brass helmets from World War One used as makeshift firefighting headwear and valour medals won in the line of duty, to the most modern firefighting clothing and equipment, the museum charts the evolution of Victoria's fire services.

The collection houses more than 10,000 items, proudly donated by brigades and the families of firefighters over many decades, preserving the legacy of the hundreds of thousands of members who have served and protected their communities.

Once the headquarters of the Metropolitan Fire Brigade, the original fire control centre that operated until 1984 remains frozen in time. The communication nerve centre can be viewed as it was when fire alarms alerted dispatchers to emergencies around Melbourne.

An iconic landmark, the National Trust-listed building features room after room of unique memorabilia, including historic uniforms, bells, photographs, insignia, equipment, flags, medals and other collectables, each with a story to tell.

The museum building began in 1972 as the

MFB Headquarters Historical Society but, because of the size of the collection that includes a vast array of CFA memorabilia, it became the Fire Services Museum Victoria.

The museum is staffed by a dedicated team of volunteers (pictured bottom right), many former firefighters themselves, who are committed to preserving the history of firefighting.

"We ensure that the history and legacy of the fire services are preserved," Museum President Tim Hughes said. "We want people to understand the evolution of firefighting, especially in Melbourne and country Victoria."

The original Jamie Cooper 'Spirit of CFA' painting adorns one of the many display rooms, alongside a CFA tunic from 1890.

Some of CFA's heritage fleet vehicles can be viewed in the museum, including a horse-drawn pumper from Traralgon Fire Brigade and the 1939 Dodge pumper, which are popular with visitors. Other CFA heritage fleet vehicles can be viewed by appointment at the Newport site on Champion Road.

These vehicles are used for CFA events including brigade open days, community events and Santa runs. The museum will also be participating in a joint display with Eastey Fire Trucks at the upcoming firefighter State Championships in Stawell.

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A new era for Keysborough

For the members of Keysborough Fire Brigade, the promise of a new home is more than just bricks and mortar – it's the culmination of a journey spanning two decades. It's a story that combines resilience, a brigade that transformed itself from the inside out and cutting-edge data analysis that finally proved what the locals knew all along: Keysborough needed its own station to keep its community safe.

After years of uncertainty, the announcement that Keysborough will receive a new fire station has been met with a collective sigh of relief and a surge of excitement. The project, backed by an initial \$500,000 investment in the 2022-23 Victorian State Budget for planning works, is set to secure the future of emergency response in this growing pocket of Melbourne's south-east.

A long road travelled

The conversation about the future of Keysborough Fire Brigade is not new. In fact, discussions about the brigade's viability and location date back to 2003. For years the brigade faced significant challenges, grappling with questions about its identity and its proximity to the neighbouring Noble Park Fire Brigade.

Through the lens of Fire Services Reform and the shifting landscape of emergency management, the brigade found itself at a crossroads. But rather than falter, Keysborough brigade reinvented itself.

Today, the brigade is unrecognisable from the one that entered those initial discussions years ago. It has blossomed into a thriving hub of activity, boasting a membership that is culturally and gender diverse, truly mirroring the vibrant multicultural community it serves. The station is no longer just a garage for trucks, but a community anchor.

However, the existing facility has long been outgrown. Despite being geographically well-placed to protect local assets – including nearby schools and residential growth zones – the site has faced logistical constraints that made a stay-put solution difficult.



The science of safety

Determining the future of the brigade required more than just intuition; it required hard evidence. CFA's Strategic Insights team stepped in to revolutionise the decision-making process. Moving away from simple radius maps, the team used a new 'node coverage' methodology. This sophisticated approach analyses service delivery at a granular level.

"We didn't just look at circles on a map. We used dynamic road network modelling to calculate exactly which properties could be reached within our service delivery standards (SDS)," Manager Strategic Insights Paul Nguyen said. "The node coverage method allows us to see the real-world impact of traffic, road networks and travel times on community safety."

The data revealed the crucial insight that the current Keysborough location was arguably one of the best in the state for its specific patch, achieving close to 100 per cent node coverage. This means that almost every property in the brigade's response area can be reached within the critical timeframe required to save lives and property.

For a long time, a prevailing proposal was to merge Keysborough and Noble Park brigades into a single 'super station' at Parkmore that would be responsible for covering both response areas. On paper, it seemed like a consolidation of resources, but in reality the data told a different story. The Strategic Insights analysis showed that such a move would result in significantly poorer outcomes for local residents.

Currently, Keysborough has about 99.9 per cent coverage, while Noble Park sits at a robust 91.4 per cent. The modelling showed that combining them at the Parkmore site would lead to a combined coverage of just 63.5 per cent. A merger would leave huge swathes of the community outside the rapid response zone. This data-driven validation was the turning point, supporting the argument to maintain Keysborough and Noble Park as separate and vital entities.

Finding the perfect fit

With a merger off the table, the focus shifted to finding a new home for Keysborough brigade that retained the operational excellence of the current site without its physical limitations. The search was a collaborative effort. The brigade captain played a pivotal role, identifying several potential locations that were then stress-tested against the node coverage model. The aim was simple but ambitious: preserve the existing 100 per cent coverage while providing a modern facility.

A potential location has been identified as the ideal solution, which promises to maintain the high standards of service delivery the community expects while giving the volunteers the modern facilities they deserve.

This outcome was the result of deep engagement between the brigade and senior government officials. Local Member for Mordialloc Tim Richardson has been a vocal champion for the brigade, walking the journey with the volunteers. Similarly, the Minister for Emergency Services Vicki Ward has taken a hands-on approach, visiting the station to understand the challenges first-hand.

"We've worked incredibly hard to build a brigade that looks like our community and serves it with pride. To have the data back us up and the government support our future is a massive win for every one of our members," Keysborough Fire Brigade Captain Stewart Matulis said.

Deputy Chief Officer South East Region Trevor Owen noted that this decision underscores CFA's commitment to evidence-based planning.

"This process highlights how we are using modern technology to support our volunteers. We aren't just guessing where stations should go, we are proving it. Keysborough's new home ensures that safety standards in the south-east remain world-class," Trevor said.

As planning work begins, the mood at Keysborough is one of optimism. They have survived the uncertainty, proven their worth through data and diversity, and are now ready to lay the foundations for the next generation of service.

STORY PAUL NGUYEN AND BEN HINES





Showing up for the community

During the January 2026 fires, Taradale Fire Brigade Community Safety Coordinator Jodie Parker used social media in a proactive way to engage and inform the local community. Jodie posted regular video updates to the brigade's social media pages in the lead-up, during and in the days following the Catastrophic fire day that impacted the Harcourt region. Here is Jodie's first-hand account of how it all unfolded.

"For me, it's thinking about what I need to communicate to our local community. If we use the recent fires in Harcourt as an example, in my time at the brigade we've never had a Catastrophic fire day. So, for me, that was just a whole new level.

Prior to the Friday, we did some short, sharp bits of information around people preparing, whether that was preparing to leave or preparing to stay, and different things that they could be thinking about in terms of making a plan before Friday. Then after that, it turned into updates on what was happening with the fire locally, both on the day and in the week after.

For me, the focus is just keeping the messages short and sharp. We're a short attention span society now. So I just try to get to the point and let people know what they need to know. Video seems to be the preferred medium of the day, which in some ways makes it a lot quicker. You can just record a quick video of someone talking and you're done. Whereas if you're creating posts, you're going to create a graphic and maybe some text and that takes a little bit more time.

I'm not sure what day it was. It all became a bit of a blur in the end. But you start to get more views and comments and likes and followers and all that sort of stuff. We were in a little bit of

a bubble here for a few days because we were just managing the situation. But it's not until you go back out into the wider community and you walk into the council recovery hub in Castlemaine and people say, 'Hey, thanks for the updates'.

There has been a little bit of a moment of strangers just being like, 'Wow, thank you so much for what you did'. I don't even know these people. It's a bit surreal to be honest. The feedback from people and the overwhelming kindness that I have received in return has been phenomenal.

Previously, I was a bit loathe to be in front of the camera. But the reality of the situation was that I didn't have time to be writing things or trying to find someone else to do it. In this instance, I just thought what can I do? I'm not on the truck this time. Had I been on the truck, it probably would have looked very different.

My key pieces of advice are know your community and know how to communicate with them. The way that I communicate may not be what your community needs. And I think just be yourself. You don't have to be polished in the way that you speak. I think people will respond to you just talking naturally, rather than trying to be a presence or something that's somewhat unnatural for you. Know what your community wants and just be yourself. And I feel like you can't go wrong if you do those two things."

STORY ALISON SMIRNOFF

Use the QR code to watch our video with Jodie.



ANNA
Your updates are so good- Thank you for taking the time each day do both update and educate.

TANIA
Thanks for this update. I was worried the fire had kicked off again.

EMMALINE
These updates are so valuable, educational and providing peace of mind, thank you.

MONICA
Thank you Jodie. Your updates are fantastic and so reassuring.

SUE
Our heartfelt thanks CFA love you all.



Chief Officer's message

2025-26 high-risk weather season



Since our last edition, our people and our communities have experienced an extremely challenging high-risk weather season. At the time of writing, we have responded to multiple major fires across Victoria, with some of the most significant being at Longwood, Streatham, Natimuk, Skipton, Ravenswood South-Harcourt, Walwa, Carlisle River, the Wyperfeld Complex fires including Boinka, the Wonnangatta-Dargo Complex, Charlton,

Patchewollock, Gooramab, Markwood and Yarroweyah. We have also responded to many other small and medium-sized fires across the state. Throughout this period our members, both volunteers and staff, have worked tirelessly to protect lives and property in what have been demanding and often difficult conditions.

Although all the data is yet to come in from brigades to inform our fire reporting, what we already have on hand shows the amazing work undertaken by our people.

As of 30 January, for the period 7 January to 27 January 2026:

- brigades have responded to more than 3,300 incidents
- there were more than 7,000 individual vehicle responses to these incidents, using more than 1,800 unique appliances from more than 780 brigades
- response to these incidents was supported by over 400 strike teams, requiring more than 2,000 appliance deployments, made up of over 1,000 unique appliances from 650 brigades
- across these incidents, there have already been in excess of 23,000 member turnouts recorded in completed fire reports.

On the catastrophic fire day, 9 January 2026, specifically:

- CFA was paged to almost 200 grass and scrub fires (including to support FRV)
- more than 80 strike teams were dispatched via CAD to support these incidents on the day.

I want to express my deepest thanks to every member of the CFA family, our partner and interstate/international agencies and the community members who have stepped forward to support the response. Whether you were on the fireground, working in incident management teams or district command centres, working behind the scenes, supporting the community, or caring for neighbours and those affected, your contribution has made a real difference. In moments like these, it becomes clear just how strong and connected our communities truly are.

To our members and community who have been directly impacted: we are thinking of you. We recognise that the disruption, stress and loss caused by fire can continue long after the fires have been extinguished. Please know you are not alone. We stand with you now and in the months ahead as recovery efforts continue. Your resilience inspires us and your wellbeing remains a priority.

Thank you again to everyone who has supported the response during this challenging period. Your dedication and commitment to protecting lives and property reflects the true spirit and meaning of CFA.

Fire impacts people in many different ways. If you need support, assistance or simply someone to talk to, please reach out. Your wellbeing matters and help is always close by.

Wellbeing resources:

The Wellbeing Hub – CFA Members Online:

CFA Wellbeing Support Line: 1800 959 232



Please continue to look after yourself, your families and your teams.

This edition of the Quarterly Operational Update includes the following key insights from recent operational activity and case studies. I encourage all members to review these insights and discuss them at both brigade and group levels.

- Responding to fire alarms (first on scene)
- The Post Season Debrief Program, including AARs and surveys
- Charlton grass and scrub fire case study





First on scene – responding to automatic alarms

In 2025, CFA brigades responded to more than 3,100 false alarms at protected premises with monitored automatic alarm systems. Some premises averaged more than one false alarm per week. This frequency can lead to frustration among CFA members, and potentially to complacency, where automatic alarm calls can be sometimes viewed as an inefficient use of time.

However, these systems are installed to provide early warning of fire and any automatic alarm response may be the first indication of a developing structure fire.

Reduction of false alarms would not only ensure effective use of members' time, but also reduce risk to members and the community through the reduction of Code 1 driving. This edition of the First on scene series outlines practical action brigades can take before, during and after an incident to reduce preventable false alarms at protected premises and minimise time spent on scene at false alarms.

- after-hours contacts
- sprinkler and hydrant boost points
- suggested initial tasking

Preplans provide critical situational awareness, particularly for members unfamiliar with the site

- access arrangements, such as keys or electronic fobs, to allow prompt entry when premises are unattended.

During inspections, brigades are encouraged to confirm information such as after-hours contacts and access details. Updated information and details about keys should be submitted using Form 5 – Alarm Information. This ensures turnout notes and pager messages reflect current information.

Initial tasking and investigation

Reading the pager message you see that you have keys to the premises in your brigade's key safe and you make sure to grab them before you hop into your truck. En route to the call you open the preplan for the premises and you note the location of the fire indicator panel and booster point. You also make note of specific risk factors for this premises, which includes 100 moderate dependency residents at the facility. Two other trucks are responding with you, one from your brigade and one from a neighbouring brigade.

Picture this ... it's 9am on a Monday and your pager and SAS alert you to an ALARC1 call to your local aged care residence. It's the third time you've been responded to the premises within the past week and the previous two occurrences have been false alarms.

Information gathering

An effective response to protected premises begins well before the pager activates. Strong pre-incident planning improves safety, efficiency and confidence for responding crews. Key elements include:

- regular site familiarisation visits by all operational brigade members, particularly for complex or high-risk premises
- development of a preplan, accessible to responding crews, detailing:
 - fire indicator panel (FIP) location
 - major hazards and risks
 - site layouts and access points

thermal imaging camera, quick-lay/hose deployment bag, dry powder extinguisher and basic entry tools. Having this equipment with the initial investigation crew allows immediate action to be taken if a fire is found, rather than having to withdraw and retool, and supports early intervention under RECEO principles potentially reducing fire spread and damage.

Likely tasking to follow may be to direct next arriving firefighting vehicles to the sprinkler boost point to support any sprinklers that may be suppressing a fire, or sending that crew to another entry point near the activated detector. This would depend on the particular premises and associated preplan.

Two crews with breathing apparatus have gone to the area that the detector activated to investigate its cause, and the third crew on scene has sited their vehicle ready to boost the sprinklers if required. As incident controller, you have set yourself up at the FIP to control the incident from there. The investigating crews find the detector that has activated, and through their investigation find that it was caused by cooking fumes from a toaster that has been set up in a bedroom by a resident rather than using the ones in the kitchen. It is a false alarm. You provide a 'False Alarm Stop' wordback to Firecom.

If investigation identifies the call to be a false alarm, attention should shift to identifying the cause and preventing recurrence. Are crews able to identify potential causes? For example, was there activity by the occupants that caused activation or is there something on the FIP that would indicate system faults? Where there is a high likelihood of recurrence, temporary isolation of part of the alarm system may be considered. But be aware that any isolations will reduce detection capability of the system, so they should only be undertaken after careful assessment and clear communication to the property owner or occupant that the component of the system has been isolated.

When it has been established that the call is a false alarm, timely release of unnecessary resources should be considered to minimise disruption to members and reduce costs to CFA and the premises. If vehicles remain on scene for other reasons, or are delayed from returning to station (such as conducting an impromptu inspection or a fuelling stop) vehicles should be marked as returning and in station with Firecom.



Reporting

Accurate reporting of false alarms at protected premises is a key step for both the premises and CFA to manage preventable false alarms. There are two reports to complete for a false alarm at a protected premises.

- A False Alarm and Entry Advice (FA&EA). This is a paper-based form that must be completed with the details of the alarm activation while still on scene. A copy of this form should be given to the premises before crews depart. This can provide immediate information that the premises can use to rectify faults. Use the QR code for advice on how to complete the form.
- When all vehicles are back in station, a FIRS report must also be completed, detailing the response by CFA to the incident. A digital copy of the FA&E advice form (either photo or scanned) should be attached to the FIRS report.



Reducing false alarms

Charging fees for false alarms: Charging aims to encourage premises to address preventable causes of false alarms. All automatic alarm attendances at protected premises are reviewed by CFA's Performance Improvement team against legislative requirements to identify whether charging is appropriate. The details in the FIRS report and FA&E advice form will contribute to the decision made during the review, along with other factors. If premises ask the responding crews whether they will be charged, members should not provide advice on charging outcomes because decisions are made by authorised CFA delegates based on a full review of available information.

Engagement with premises: Brigades are also encouraged to engage their catchment commander or brigade administration support officer to work with the premises to identify causes and reduce ongoing activations, particularly with premises with high volumes of false alarms.

Accurate reporting and engagement, including through false alarm charging, resulted in effective preventative measures being implemented at the premises. This included restricting cooking in resident bedrooms, which has led to a reduction in false alarms at the premises.

Reducing preventable false alarms benefits CFA, the premises and the community by ensuring members' time and CFA resources remain available for genuine emergencies, and minimising risks to the public of unnecessary Code 1 response of vehicles.



2025-26 Post Season Debrief Program

The 2025-26 fire season has been the most significant season CFA has experienced for many years. A season of this scale inevitably generates more feedback, success stories and operational lessons. Capturing this information is essential to ensure lessons are identified and changes made to improve CFA's performance.

CFA's Performance Improvement team has initiated the 2025-26 Post Season Debrief Program to gather feedback and insights from members. There are various avenues being used to capture this including:

- facilitated after-action reviews (AARs) with fireground leaders following significant incidents
- tailored surveys to strike team leaders, sector commanders and divisional commanders
- targeted interviews with key personnel, particularly those involved in the transfer of control to an ICC from a fireground
- district and region surveys and facilitated AARs for those who had significant operational activity.

There has already been strong engagement with the program. This season has been taxing. Fatigue is high and member availability can be limited, so we sincerely thank members for the time they have taken to document their feedback and attend AARs. All feedback is appreciated and valued and is being collated to support continuous improvement.

This article outlines the various components of the Post Season Debrief Program in greater detail and explains where you can access further resources or support.

After-action reviews

Debriefing and AARs are essential elements of the continuous learning cycle where we learn from our experiences by capturing, analysing and implementing lessons to improve performance. The purpose of the AAR is to ask:

- what was planned?
- what happened?
- why did it happen?
- what would we do differently next time?

Not every incident requires a formal, structured AAR. Minor incidents with no major lessons learned will benefit from a 'hot debrief', which involves a discussion among crews about what happened, if there was anything that worked well or could be improved to share lessons within the team.

Hot debriefs and AARs are undertaken at all levels, whether at the crew level after a deployment or as a brigade following sustained activities.

Please remember, AAR and debrief observations can be submitted collectively or individually to your district or region and copied to aar@cfa.vic.gov.au.

Major incident AARs

With the high number of major incidents across the state, the Performance Improvement team has set up additional processes to support districts and regions with the AAR process. A pool of facilitators is supporting districts and regions with the coordination and delivery of AARs for significant incidents that occur (or have occurred) during the 2025-26 Fire Danger Period.

Incident management team AARs

As well as the fireground AAR process, a joint Forest Fire Management Victoria and CFA Incident management team debrief program is being commissioned. This will be a structured review process across all incident management teams and ICCs that managed the fires in January 2026.

Senior fireground leader surveys

To date, two major surveys have been distributed to collate tailored feedback. We strongly encourage members to submit feedback in a timely way because the surveys will close towards the end of April.

Strike team leader (STL) survey

Last year, CFA trialled collecting feedback from STLs through a survey to gain valuable insights into the finer details of strike team deployments. This included topics such as planning, activation and logistics and management, to understand the overall experience and impact on members. Use the QR code to read a summary of the findings and outcomes. We encourage you to distribute this through your networks.



STLs who are deployed or are activated but then cancelled are invited to participate in the survey again. The feedback will enable CFA to build on the progress made last year and improve systems and processes to ensure we better support our members during deployments. The STL survey can be accessed using this QR code.



Division and sector commander survey

Based on feedback from last year's survey, CFA has expanded the surveys to also capture feedback from division and sector commanders.

The Division and Sector Commander Survey can be accessed using this QR code.



Next steps

As operational activity reduces and feedback is captured, the Performance Improvement team will analyse this to identify statewide themes and insights. All outcomes will then be assessed against current activities and actions from other reviews that are already planned or underway (for example, from last year's survey to STLs). Where not already part of existing actions, additional recommendations will be made and incorporated into the Post Season Debrief Program report for the Chief Officer's review.

Looking ahead to future seasons

The Performance Improvement team is exploring initiatives to ensure feedback and lessons continue to be collected in an efficient and consistent way. These will strengthen how we capture insights and communicate outcomes.

Work is underway to improve feedback loops, enhance communication channels and update content available on Members Online. As these changes are developed and rolled out in coming seasons, consultation will remain a central part of the process to ensure it aligns with the needs of those contributing.

Resources and more information

A dedicated Members Online page has been established to provide an overview of the program, and access to the various surveys and other supporting resources. This will be updated as the program progresses. Use this QR code to access the page.



Additional information about lessons management and after-action reviews can be found using this QR code.

If you have any questions or need guidance, contact lessons-management-centre@cfa.vic.gov.au





Charlton grass and scrub fire

Summary

Just after midday on 18 December 2025, a grass and scrub fire was reported on Parish Road, Charlton, in north-west Victoria. The fire reignited from a private burn-off conducted 10 weeks earlier and escalated rapidly under the day's hot, dry and windy conditions. This became a significant incident for the area on a scale many members had not previously experienced. The response highlighted several important lessons including the value of early escalation, the importance of strong communication and command structures, and the ongoing need for robust prevention works and regular exercising.

Incident overview

Just before 1pm, a column of smoke was sighted from the Mt Brennan fire tower. Within seconds of the initial report the captain of Jeffcott Fire Brigade escalated the response to 15 tankers and requested two aircraft. Bulk water tankers were also requested shortly after, which was promptly actioned by the district command centre (DCC).

By 1.03pm, Bird Dog 384, still about 80 kilometres from the scene, provided an initial situation report. Multiple smoke columns were visible, driven by a north-north-westerly wind. Three minutes later, the fire was reported to be about 10 to 12 hectares in size, moving rapidly east. The call was made to make tankers 25.

At 1.14pm, control was established by a group officer, who provided a wordback of grass and scrub not yet under control. Two trucks were on scene at that stage and fire behaviour was already described as fast moving.

At 1.18pm, the DCC advised that Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMV) crews were en route and were estimated to arrive in 20 minutes.

Bird Dog 384 reached the area at 1.32pm and the DCC tasked the aircraft with mapping the incident and advising on suppression efforts. Conditions continued to deteriorate.

At 1.43pm, Golden Square Fire Brigade's field operations vehicle (FOV) arrived and requested direction for establishing a control point. The DCC advised this would be confirmed shortly, as the fire had now crossed the Avoca River and was impacting St Arnaud–Charlton Road. A further wordback from the group officer confirmed that the fire remained uncontrolled and had grown to approximately 250 hectares.

A district commander deployed to the control point established at Charlton Fire Station at 3.34pm.

As evening approached, some vehicles and aircraft were progressively released. A strike team arrived at 8pm to begin night operations. At 10pm, a wordback was received advising the incident was now under control.

Weather conditions on the day significantly influenced fire behaviour. The temperature peaked at 39.8°C with 8 per cent relative humidity. Winds were westerly–north-westerly at 20 to 37 kilometres/hour, and the Fire Behaviour Index (FBI) was 49. Fuel loads varied across the landscape, which was mostly barley and canola stubble. Most harvesting had been completed, though paddocks still contained windrows of harvest slash, contributing to intensified fire behaviour. Flames were reported visible up to 10 kilometres away because of the speed of the fire.



In total, the response involved more than 40 CFA vehicles, additional strike teams from surrounding areas, numerous FFMV slip-ons and tankers, a large number of private farm vehicles, eight single-engine air tankers, two helitaks, observation aircraft, three bulk water tankers and catering support.

What worked well

Early resource requests: Quick escalation ensured tankers, aircraft and bulk water were deployed early, giving crews the best possible chance to get ahead of a fast-moving fire. If conditions are severe, it is best to request additional support early, rather than waiting to see how the fire develops.

Preparedness: Despite some delays in prevention works, the district went into the day with a strong readiness posture, supported by pre-season planning.

Use of RMR channel: The RMR channel provided stable, reliable communication with the DCC throughout the incident. Be familiar with alternative comms options in your district and understand when and how to use them.

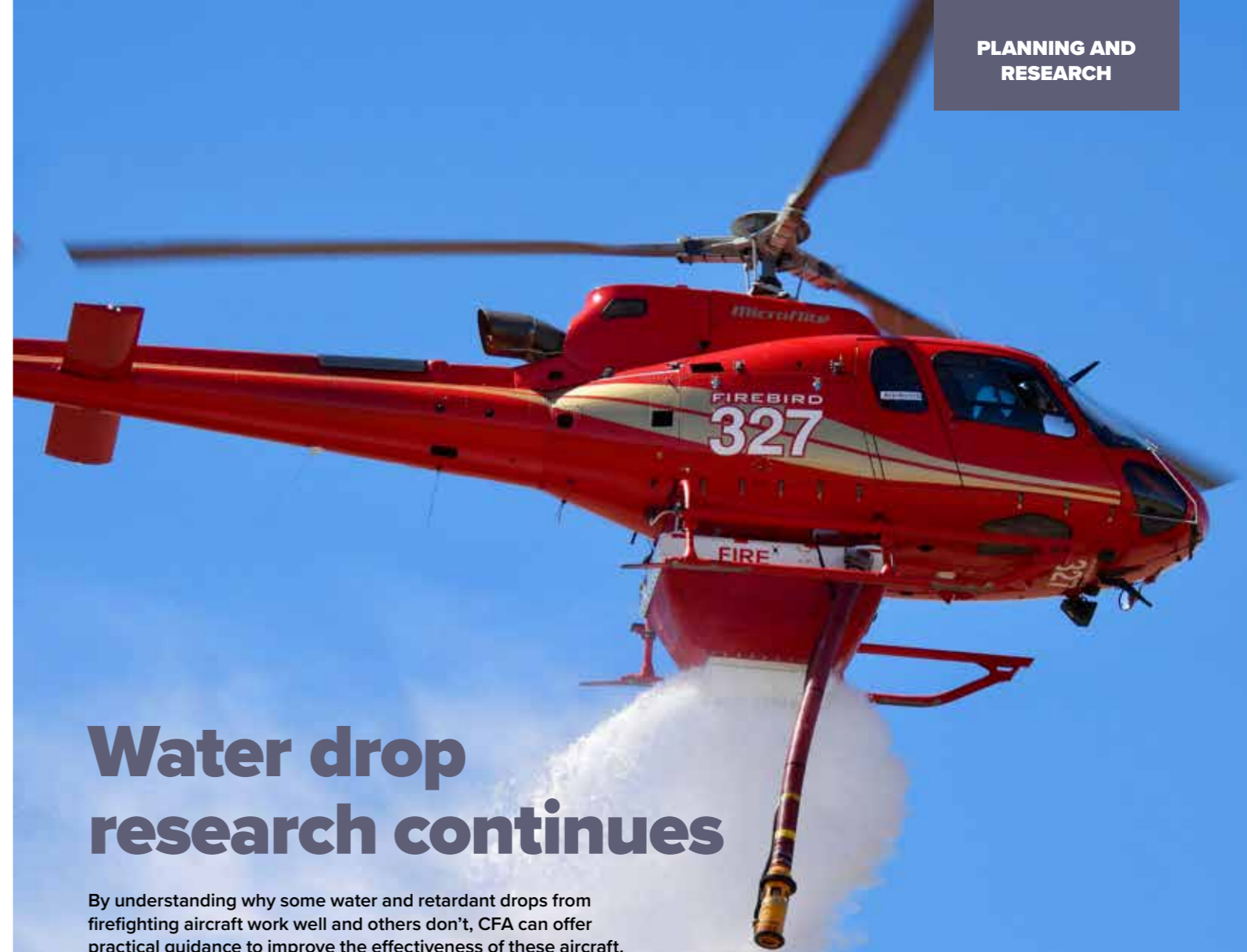
Linkage with DCC: The DCC provided consistent support with resourcing, intelligence and coordination, which helped the incident controller (IC) maintain situational awareness under pressure. Strong two-way communication with your DCC can significantly improve incident coordination, especially on high-tempo days.

Situational awareness and intelligence: The DCC created maps and downloaded live video feed from the aircraft and sent it to the tablets in field command vehicles on the fireground. This improved the situational awareness for the IC and sector commanders in the field.

Bulk water tankers and early response: The early arrival of large-capacity water tankers proved extremely valuable in an area with minimal available water sources. Know what high-volume water assets are available in your area and when to request them.

Local relationships: Close working relationships with FFMV, Buloke Shire and local landholders meant additional machinery and private vehicles were integrated quickly and effectively. Strong local partnerships that were built before the fire season paid off during this fast-moving incident.

Intelligence from aircraft: Airborne mapping and spotting information from the Bird Dog provided critical situational awareness when smoke limited ground observations. Don't underestimate the value of aviation intelligence – clear, timely information from the air can shape tactics early.



Water drop research continues

By understanding why some water and retardant drops from firefighting aircraft work well and others don't, CFA can offer practical guidance to improve the effectiveness of these aircraft.

During the 2023-2024 and 2024-2025 fire seasons, 51 water and retardant drop tests from eight firebombing aircraft were conducted at Balliang and Mount Mercer. This research was supported by contractors, landowners, CFA staff and volunteers, and partner agencies including the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA), Fire Rescue Victoria, Emergency Management Victoria and Parks Victoria.

By examining how aircraft speed, drop height, and tank or door controls influence coverage, continuity and penetration, we can better understand what each aircraft does well and where its limitations lie. As we bring in newer and larger aircraft with different tank systems, we want to be sure they're delivering the performance we need. Drop testing also helps build a clearer, shared understanding of the aircraft fleet – aircraft with similar capacities can produce different drop patterns.

Drop testing helps us understand how flight parameters and tank settings influence drop quality, shows how different tank designs behave in practice, and allows us to begin using evidence to match aircraft to the tasks they are best suited to.

During the testing, each aircraft was flown through a series of drops over a purpose-built test grid in grassland and wooded vegetation to allow the drop characteristics to be measured consistently. Each grid comprised between 700 and 1,200 sampling cups arranged in a rectangular pattern at three-metre spacing. At each grid point, sample cups were placed to collect the water or retardant from each drop.

Baseline testing was undertaken under calm conditions, with aircraft flown at prescribed speeds and heights. After each set of drops, the sample cups were collected and weighed, and the distribution and density per area of suppressant was calculated.

Testing showed how the delivery system influenced whether a drop is dense and continuous or thin and broken up. Feedback from air attack supervisors reinforced that an effective drop is defined less by total volume and more by penetration into the fuel bed, consistent density and continuity. Overall tank design and pilot experience were consistently identified as the strongest determinants of drop quality.

A key part of this work was measuring how much volume of suppressant an aircraft can lift. Testing showed that the volume an aircraft reports is not always the volume that ends up being dropped. How much can be lifted is influenced by tank design limitations as well as aircraft weight and balance tolerances, which means the delivered load can vary between each drop.

We are continuing to progress this line of work with further consultation with aircraft contractors in partnership with DEECA and CFA aviation teams.

STORY MUSA KILINC



Lessons identified

Establishing a control point and structure: A designated control point was set up, but earlier establishment and clear role separation would have helped manage the workload and span of control of the IC. Identify suitable control locations early and practise shifting from small-scale to large-scale command structures.

Communications: Radio challenges made sectorisation difficult early on and varying familiarity with upgraded radios affected confidence. UHF served as an effective backup, but created difficulties with coordination. Members are encouraged to undertake regular radio refresher training, particularly since the introduction of the new radios, to support smoother communication on the fireground. Members should also consider allocating additional channels for each sector to reduce congestion.

Exercising: There is benefit in regular exercises to prepare for incidents of this nature. Brigades should consider undertaking exercises that allow members to practise sectorisation, command roles, comms plans and interagency coordination.

Questions for your brigade

- Have you discussed the option to use an RMR channel, and when this may be effective to support fireground communications?
- How does your brigade build and maintain working relationships with local stakeholders, including the shire council, landholders and other emergency response agencies? How could you improve on this?
- Does your brigade undertake regular exercises and practise implementing control structures?

Conclusion

This incident showed how quickly a grass fire can develop under extreme weather, and how important early escalation, strong local relationships and close support from the DCC are in managing fast-moving events. Despite the challenges, agencies worked together effectively and achieved a positive outcome in difficult conditions.

The fire also reinforced the value of clear incident structures, reliable communications and regular exercising – especially for brigades that may not often face large-scale fires.

Thank you to the members that attended and contributed to the AAR. If you have any lessons to share email lessons-management-centre@cfa.vic.gov.au.

Arduous firefighter trial launches



A group of specially-trained CFA firefighters has had an intense fire season tackling fires in remote areas across the state, following seven weeks of intensive training to become arduous firefighters. The pilot program, a first for CFA, includes 15 arduous firefighters with the capability to attack and suppress fires in terrain that can't be accessed by a fire truck or aircraft.

The crew is made up of volunteers who respond to different types of scenarios, including lightning strikes, bushfires and preventative works such as backburning operations. They can be deployed to remote areas for up to 24 hours and are trained to walk up to 45 minutes from a vehicle.

They also carry 20 kilogram packs that include a range of tools such as chainsaws, leaf blowers, hose lay packs and small pumps to help them create fire breaks or directly suppress fires by pumping water directly from a nearby creek or dam.

Corio Fire Brigade volunteer and Remote Arduous Firefighting Team Leader Bradley Coulter has been part of the pilot program for a year. He helped identify what equipment was needed and helps coordinate the response.

"My role is to ensure we have the skills the team requires to successfully complete the task given," Bradley said.

"Over the course of the training we've not only benefited from the new skills we've learned, but we've also become an incredible team and we consider each other family.

"In my coordination role, safely undertaking the task is my number one priority, then making sure we have the right balance of skills in the right roles. The team is incredibly fit and has the specialist skills and the endorsement to operate in remote areas where we don't have a dedicated vehicle to support us.

"It's been an intense journey but I'm exceptionally proud of the team and the camaraderie we've created."

Chief Officer Jason Heffernan said about 60 per cent of Victoria is privately-owned land and a large portion of that is bushland, so it's important for CFA to increase capability to help further protect lives and property.

"These arduous firefighters give CFA a complementary service alongside our partner agency Forest Fire Management Victoria to work together to protect communities across the state," Jason said. "The crew will not only be a great asset for Victoria, but they can also be deployed to support the suppression of interstate fires.

"This team has worked incredibly hard over several months and should be proud of what they've achieved. Thanks to the NSW Rural Fire Service that delivered the specialised training, our team was ready to respond in the 2025-26 fire season."

CFA will evaluate the use and effectiveness of the arduous crew at the end of the fire season with the hope to extend the program further in 2026.

"It would be great to see this program extended, with those in metropolitan Melbourne also encouraged to join," Jason said.

STORY AMY SCHILDBERGER



"Our aim is to be rapidly inserted somewhere to get on top of small events before they become big events."

How CFA plans a planned burn

To reduce the bushfire risk in Victoria, CFA works with Forest Fire Management Victoria to develop a rolling three-year Joint Fuel Management Program (JFMP) of planned burns.

Types of burns include fuel reduction, ecological and Traditional Owner burns. The JFMP also includes non-burn fuel treatments including mechanical treatments such as slashing, mowing and mulching vegetation, and biological treatments such as grazing.

Some people may think CFA decides on the day to do a burn because the weather looks favourable. However, many months of planning and approvals are needed to get a planned burn ready to be delivered, and engagement with

communities and stakeholders occurs at all stages of planning and delivering a burn.

Timelines for the steps in the planning process may vary from region to region. The planning calendar below assumes that a burn nominated in January 2026 will be delivered in autumn 2027.

In certain situations, a planned burn can be fast-tracked.

For more information about vegetation management and the JFMP use the QR code.



PLANNING CALENDAR

PROCESS



A planned burn treatment can be identified by the land manager, CFA brigade members, Traditional Owners or other community members.

For the treatment to then be nominated into the JFMP it needs to have landowner agreement, be operationally feasible and meet specific objectives, such as fuel reduction, ecological or cultural objectives.

Regional Vegetation Management Teams and CFA commanders obtain CFA brigade/group endorsement of risk before taking it to the Municipal Fire Management Planning Sub Committee (MFMPSC) or other local endorsement processes.



The planned burn is nominated in the draft JFMP in the online Fuel Management System and mapped in eMap.



Biodiversity, cultural heritage and historic heritage assessments are undertaken by CFA advisers for every nominated fuel treatment. Mitigations are identified for the protection of values and compliance with legislation.

Indicative costs for planned burn treatments are determined (land manager/agencies often fund planned burn preparation works).



The Regional JFMP is endorsed by the CFA Manager Community Safety and District Assistant Chief Fire Officers (ACFO).



The JFMP is approved by the CFA Chief Officer and DEECA Chief Fire Officer.

BURN PLANNING



Site visits are undertaken to gather the required information to develop the burn plan. This includes identifying any preparatory works required such as control line works and hazardous tree assessments/treatment. Quotes are obtained for preparatory works.

All required permits and consents are obtained. Examples include:

- consent to work within a road reserve
- traffic management Memorandum of Authorisation
- Schedule 2 permits for burning of vegetation during a Fire Danger Period
- obtaining land manager/owner consent



Each burn plan is then endorsed by Manager Community Safety and approved by district ACFO.

Key components of the burn plan include:

- objective of the burn
- fuel type and burn prescriptions*
- consents/permits
- values identified and mitigations
- complexity rating
- control lines
- tasks
- ignition plan
- safety considerations
- resourcing
- notifications/community engagement
- contingency planning

*Burn plan prescriptions detail the weather, fuel and environmental conditions required to safely conduct the burn. Prescriptions consider fine fuel moisture content, relative humidity, fuel load, temperature, Keetch Byram Drought Index, Fire Danger Index and wind speed. For grassland burns, curing and grazing is considered.

Good Friday Appeal:

75 years of CFA support



CFA has a long and proud history of involvement with the Good Friday Appeal and the Royal Children's Hospital (RCH), reflecting the commitment, generosity and community spirit of volunteers.

This year will mark an impressive milestone for the Appeal, which is celebrating its 95th year. CFA will share in the special milestone, having raised vital funds for this iconic Victorian cause for 75 of those years.

CFA members have raised more than \$41 million for the Appeal, with hopes this year to raise more than last year's \$1.88 million.

Almost 150 brigades are involved in tin rattling, door knocking and fundraising efforts each year. Not only is it an outstanding cause for the kids, but it's also a great opportunity for CFA to connect with local community members.

Ararat Fire Brigade (shown above) continues to be one of many long-standing supporters of the Good Friday Appeal, heading into their 57th year after having first begun fundraising efforts in 1970. Brigade member Jim Jackson got things started after his daughter received lifesaving heart surgery at the RCH.

Jim dedicated 37 years as area manager of the Appeal, first raising \$764 within the Ararat community before a staggering grand total of \$743,869. Right up until his passing in 2015, Jim would stay back until the last cent was counted and begged to see what the final tally was.

Graeme and Peter Cooper took over the reins from Jim in the years following, dedicating all their spare time, before Graeme's passing in 2021.

For the past five years, Rhonda Wall and Daniel Ramsdell have taken the lead as area managers, continuing the legacy that has been passed on for more than 50 years.

"We will ensure the support to the RCH and the Appeal continues around Ararat long into the future and will endure to honour Jim's legacy with the same dedication, drive and passion he had for the Appeal," Rhonda said.

"We all love raising money for the kids and seeing it go toward research and development to help enable them to give children a better life through treatment and cures.

"One of my relations received treatment from the age of one to 16 years old and I cannot speak highly enough of the care and dedication at the hospital.

"There are other brigade members' families who have had children treated there too, such as Peter Cooper when his daughter required open-heart surgery.

"The CFA connection is very special throughout Victoria, and we are proud to carry on this tradition for many years to come."

Ararat brigade's current tally stands at \$1,163,913 with an annual target of \$30,000.

Over the past 75 years, CFA members have raised more than **\$41 million** for the Appeal.

"We fundraise by walking the streets of Ararat rattling tins with bus loads of children, friends and parents, some of whom have had children hospitalised at the Royal Children's Hospital," Rhonda said.

"We also collect at the traffic lights raising a large amount of money; and all the pubs, clubs and businesses in Ararat have collection boxes too.

"One volunteer visits the neighbouring towns on the outskirts of Ararat and has been doing so for many years.

"Member Carl Forshaw has raised roughly \$18,000 for the Appeal over eight years through raffles, auctions, barbecues, concerts and dressing up as the Easter Bunny. He will continue until he can't and says he is doing it for the kids."

Rhonda encouraged other brigades to get involved if they haven't already, saying it's OK to start small because every dollar counts.

"Just do it! Keep trying until it works and ask other brigades for their advice or join in alongside them," Rhonda said.

Meanwhile in Boronia, the name Bill Ireland is synonymous with the Good Friday Appeal. He has supported the cause since 1970.

Bill joined the brigade in 1967 and recalls the brigade decided to start collecting for the hospital three years later. He has only missed two collections since.

"When I joined the brigade we weren't part of a group. It wasn't until we joined the Knox Group with seven other fire brigades that we started collecting together for the RCH," Bill said.

"I probably would have collected quite a few thousand dollars over the years, and sometimes I get the same people donating who remember me year after year.

"Over many years I've collected at the Boronia Road and Dorset Road intersection, and more recently we have been basing ourselves at Kmart in Boronia on the night before.

"We don't usually set targets, but on average we get between \$30,000 and \$35,000 a year. We try to keep up with the lack of cash that people carry so we now have a card machine available."

Bill's connection to the RCH runs deep, with his son receiving treatment when he was younger.

"I was also just made a life member of the RCH and recently received a certificate of appreciation for helping the hospital too," Bill said.

"It's amazing to see the generosity of the community and every second car donating. Lots of them have kids in the car and they learn to understand what the hospital is.

"You don't have to force people to give money – they're so generous. Last year we had people handing us \$100 notes. It's just so nice to know that you are helping in some way."

STORY LUCY BISHOP



IMAGE: BILL IRELAND (LEFT)

Register

To register your 2026 Good Friday Appeal fundraising activity, or to get your town on the regional tally board, please contact the team at collections@goodfridayappeal.com.au.

Volunteer Forum

Ahead of the Good Friday Appeal, CFA will be broadcasting the Volunteer Forum live from the Royal Children's Hospital before heading to the city for the cheque handover of the contributions from CFA and the Victorian community.

Bulk water carriers improve fire response

To strengthen firefighting capability during the 2025-26 fire season, CFA launched a new initiative funded by the Victorian Government. CFA was given an additional \$10.6 million to set up mobile and static water resources, strategically placed in 19 locations across the state (see map).

After looking at climate data and listening to our members, CFA identified the optimal operating bases for the bulk water resources to ensure timely response and accessibility.

Using additional water resources means we can reduce the time and distance fire trucks need to travel to refill with firefighting water – the water comes to them. It also reduces the demand on essential water supplies needed by regional townships and drought-affected areas.

"The bulk water carriers were on standby every day for use throughout the high-risk weather season," Chief Officer Jason Heffernan said. "While there are arrangements in place for these 19 locations, if operationally required, the water resources can be moved at any time across the state to meet the risk and operational need."

The 19 bases are at Ouyen, Hopetoun, Swan Hill, Donald, Kerang, Horsham, Edenhope, Heywood, Hamilton, Ararat, Mortlake, Ballarat, Winchelsea, Sunbury, Seymour, Bendigo, Shepparton, Wangaratta and Morwell.

"We knew leading into the fire season that there was going to be a shortage of groundwater, particularly through the west and the north," Deputy Chief Officer Garry Cook AFSM said. "But as conditions continued to dry out across the state, the shortage was right across Victoria."

If an incident controller decides they need water delivered to a fire because they don't have ready access to a farm dam, a creek or some other form of supply, they can request a bulk water tanker through their district duty officer.

"We chose geographical locations where the water tankers could support our firefighters on the fireground within 60 minutes. It's proving to be very beneficial and something we will certainly be looking to continue in the future."

"It's the first time we've had bulk water at our disposal without having to pick up the phone to see whether they are available to support us. We've sourced these 19 bulk water tankers and got them on contract so they're available to CFA," Garry said.

"Our aim is to keep small fires small, and the quicker we can reload our appliances and get them back on the fire line, the greater the chance we have of doing that.

"It doesn't matter whether they're firefighters from CFA, Forest Fire Management Victoria, or from interstate. If they need water and we've got our bulk water carrier there, they're ready to reload and get back on the line as quickly as possible."

The feedback from volunteers on the ground has been positive.

"In our area half the dams are empty," Heskett-Kerrie Fire Brigade firefighter Paul Fletcher said. "The bulk water tanker is brilliant. It's right in the middle of the action and saves us so much time and gets us back on the fireground saving houses."

"The bulk water tanker allows us to get in and out and put water on the assets we've been looking after. It's a quick fill to get back on the fireground," Warring Fire Brigade firefighter Trevor Cubbi said.

"It's saving us having to draught from dams and it's giving us water really fast," Riddells Creek Fire Brigade firefighter Michael Hemingway said. "It's a fantastic initiative that CFA has brought in for this season and I certainly hope it continues into the future."

"I think it's vital for incidents like this where water isn't always guaranteed," Woodvale Fire Brigade 2nd Lieutenant Daniel Kirby said. "It's great that firefighters know they've got one spot they can go to and have a reliable water source."

At some of the January fires, bulk water tankers had two drivers so that the tankers were available on the fireground 24 hours a day.

"In our after-action review processes we'll look at how we used the bulk water tankers. Were they in the right places? Did we maximise the opportunities we had with them and how can we improve that going forward?" Garry said.

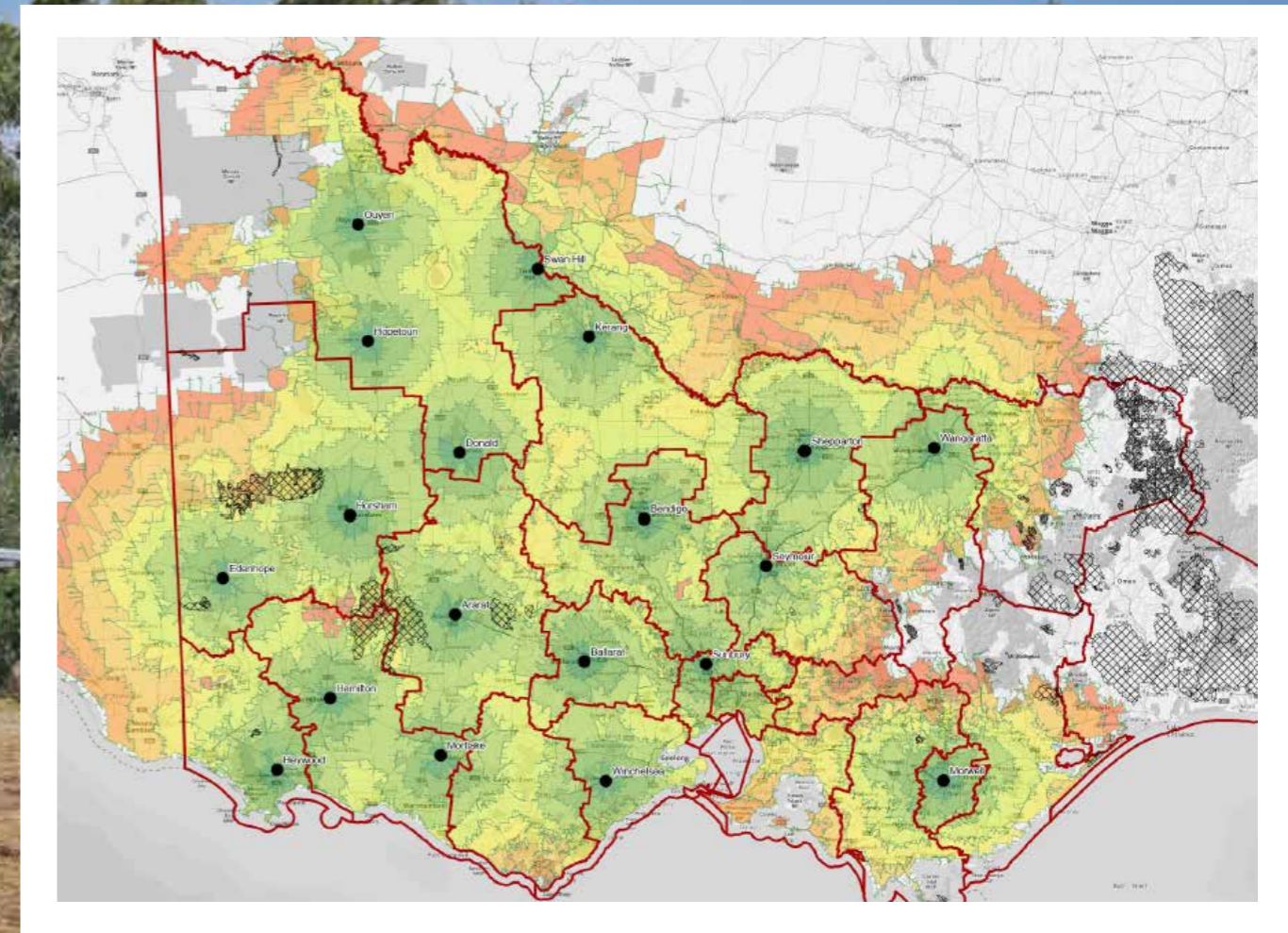


IMAGE: KEITH PAKENHAM AFSM

THE TWO OF US:

Rhett and Leah Chalwell

📍 BRIGHT BRIGADE

Married for almost 22 years, Rhett and Leah Chalwell share a long-standing commitment to both family and community through Bright Fire Brigade. Rhett has been a member for 10 years, Leah for eight, and their son and daughter have since joined the brigade. Most recently, Rhett and Leah responded to the Walwa fire in January as strike team leader and crew leader.

Rhett

I've been in CFA for about 10 years now. Myself and a friend who lived here at the time were both tradies and we decided to head down to the local station and put our names down.

Leah joined in 2018 and our son and daughter are members now too. They've both watched us do what we do and run out the door when the pager goes off. They decided they could give it a try as well.

Leah recently became 4th lieutenant at our brigade. She's the first female lieutenant for Bright in the history of the brigade. It's been good to see. A lot of people have been trying to shift the culture in our brigade to become more family orientated. I think Leah becoming 4th lieutenant is another stepping stone towards that.

There are a couple of other women in the brigade, one of them literally just joined in the last six months and another has been here for a year and a half. For them to see Leah in that role shows them there are no barriers there.

Something I admire about Leah is the way that she sees everybody, regardless of who they are, what they're doing, what their role, or what their position is. I also admire her quiet achieving. Just getting in and getting it done and not putting her hand up to say, "Look at me".

Leah

We own our own business. Rhett was working on his own but then I joined him eight years ago. Rhett was already a brigade member and when he'd get a callout I'd wait for him in the car outside the station. One day he just asked the question, "Why don't you jump on the truck?" It hadn't even occurred to me that I could. So that's how I joined.

In my experience I think women sometimes won't put their hand up for something unless they're presented with it. I think it's really important to be able to see someone else doing it. It never occurred to me that I could get my medium rigid truck licence until I saw Jenny Ricardi from Myrtleford brigade driving a truck. I've seen it happen a few times with my daughter. She asks, "Can I do that?" and I say, "Yes you can".

I think there's a lot about Rhett that people don't know because he's quite a private person. He may come across as very rigid because he's a planner and he sticks to it. But what people don't know is that he's quite playful. He's not just that one-dimensional person. He is ridiculously skilled and handy, but I think at brigade level you sometimes only see one side of people because they put a hat on.

Something I admire about Rhett is his resilience to stay in leadership. When the hard knocks come, they don't take him out. He learns from it, grows and moves on in a positive way. He makes changes to alleviate any future issues.

STORY ALISON SMIRNOFF

IMAGE: RHETT AND LEAH WITH CHILDREN RILEY AND GRACE



Read the full article on Members Online



Driver training set to go virtual

CFA's driving capability is soon to become virtual, with development underway for five mobile driving simulators.

The first of its kind across the emergency services in Victoria, this project comes as part of CFA's ongoing commitment to enhance volunteer driving capability.

The cutting-edge simulators, being made by Motum Simulation, will support the existing Volunteer Driving Training Program, which has already seen more than 1,600 heavy vehicle licences approved, the delivery of 10 driver training trucks and more than 55 driving courses scheduled across Victoria.

CFA Deputy Chief Officer for Operational Doctrine and Training, Rohan Luke said the mobile simulators are being designed to allow volunteers to experience high-risk driving scenarios in a safe, controlled environment - scenarios that are difficult or impossible to replicate in real life.

"These include emergency response driving (with lights and sirens), navigating firegrounds, avoiding falling trees and managing potential rollovers in challenging off-road conditions," Rohan said.

Equipped with virtual reality (VR) headsets and eye-tracking technology, the simulators will provide an immersive and realistic driving experience, helping drivers sharpen critical skills like spatial awareness, mirror checking and hazard perception.

Rohan said once delivered, the simulators will be fully mobile and travel across the state, providing access to volunteers in both urban and rural locations.

"Simulated environments will include a wide range of driving conditions, with trainers able to trigger dynamic events to challenge and test driver response in real time," Rohan said.

"Initially, five different response vehicles will be replicated in the simulators, including both manual and automatic transmission vehicles, ensuring volunteers receive experiences specific to the trucks they will operate in the field.

"These simulators, along with ongoing licensing and driving training efforts, will help ensure our members are well-equipped to drive safely and effectively, both now and into the future."

A sample driving simulator using some of the newly designed CFA VR software will be featured at the CFA/VFBV State Championships in March 2026.

Delivery of the first two simulators is expected in June 2026, with an additional three simulators delivered in October this year.

The \$1.26 million project is part of the Upskilling and Protecting our Firefighters Program, funded by the Victorian Government.

STORY SHAUNNAGH O'LOUGHLIN AND AMY SCHILDBERGER





Using AI on the fireground

IMAGE: WAYNE RIGG AFSM

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is the buzzword of the moment, promising to revolutionise everything from writing emails to driving cars. But for CFA the adoption of new technology isn't about following trends. When lives and property are on the line, our systems cannot simply be 'smart'; they must be robust, reliable and proven in the harshest conditions Victorian summers can throw at us.

While CFA takes a cautious approach to integrating AI, recognising that technology must never replace the skill and judgment of our people, we also recognise its potential to solve long-standing operational challenges.

The case for change

The push for smarter technology is driven by real-world needs. For example, we know that removing crew members from the back deck of tankers significantly reduces the risk of injuries from burnovers, falls and heat exhaustion. Remote-controlled monitors have been the first step in this evolution, allowing crews to fight fires from the safety of the cabin.

The effectiveness of bullbar-mounted monitors was proven during the Boxing Day 2024 fires in the Grampians. District 18 crews operating heavy tankers with monitors played a pivotal role in halting a fire run that threatened the township of Moyston. Feedback from the incident highlighted that these tankers and their monitor capability were instrumental in saving homesteads and historic structures.

However, current remote monitors can be difficult to aim accurately while a vehicle is bouncing over rough terrain during 'pump-and-roll' operations – a dynamic tactic where the tanker simultaneously drives and applies suppression. This is where AI enters the picture.

From desktop to the real world

For the past few years, CFA has partnered with Deakin University's Institute for Intelligent Systems Research and Innovation (IISRI) on a feasibility study to assess whether low-cost cameras and algorithms could identify fire edges and heat signatures to assist with targeting monitors.

Desktop testing confirmed the concept is sound. We know the cameras can 'see' the fire, but a lab environment is different from a fireground. To trust an AI system with targeting water or identifying hazards, it needs to learn from the chaotic reality of smoke, dust, vibration and glare.

This need for high quality data drove recent field testing initiatives, including data collection at hazard reduction in Swan Hill. More than 700 gigabytes of data was collected in just 90 minutes of burn from three different options of thermal infrared cameras that can be mounted to tankers. This data can be used to train the AI to distinguish between a burning fence post, a person and a spot fire, ensuring the system works when it matters most.

Scaling up

We are now entering an exciting new phase. The project has successfully secured funding from the Australian and New Zealand Council for fire and emergency services (AFAC) via the 'Bushfire Emerging Technologies Hub,' in collaboration with Google.

This next stage will move beyond theory to field tests and scale AI object detection and targeting algorithms. The project aims to refine the technology to support safer pump-and-roll firefighting.

The new funding will allow CFA to:

- **Enhance safety:** Test performance of hazard detection capabilities to identify pedestrians, fences, trees and rocks near vehicles, preventing collisions during low-visibility or high-stress conditions.
- **Improve efficiency:** Train the AI to classify fire edges in real-time, helping to automate or assist nozzle targeting so crews can focus on fire behaviour rather than fighting the joystick.
- **Work offline:** Optimise software to run on 'edge computing' systems local to the truck, so that no internet connection is required for the AI to work.
- **Feed intelligence:** Send simplified 'fire/no-fire' data back to support mapping and improve situational awareness without clogging radio networks.

By combining the skill of our firefighters with the precision of modern technology, CFA seeks to chart a course for safer tankers in the future where our crews can do their job more effectively and, most importantly, come home safely.

STORY NICK MCCARTHY



Wendy Scott

From training ground to fireground

📍 AIREYS INLET BRIGADE

Taking the step from training into a first strike team deployment can feel daunting for any new member.

For Aireys Inlet Fire Brigade member Wendy Scott that step recently became a defining and rewarding moment – one that highlights the importance of preparation, mentoring and strong brigade culture.

Wendy was deployed on her first strike team to the Otways fire complex in January 2026 as part of a composite crew from across the Coastal Group. Although she was nervous, she credits the training and support she received from Aireys Inlet brigade for giving her the confidence to take part.

"I was nervous but wasn't scared," Wendy said. "I think I did OK and I know what I can do better next time."

That confidence didn't come from chance. Wendy spoke strongly about how the brigade's ongoing training, encouragement and support prepared her for the realities of strike team work – both practically and mentally.

"I really want to thank all the Aireys brigade members and the District 7 Women's Network for all the training, support and encouragement – and the banter," she said.

Wendy was placed with an experienced and supportive crew, something she described as making a huge difference on the day.

"What an experience to be a part of," Wendy said. "I'm so grateful for all the training the brigade has put me through." Like many first deployments, the day was busy and intense – so much so that there wasn't time for a photo. Still, seeing familiar faces from her home brigade on the fireground was reassuring, reinforcing the sense of teamwork that extends beyond a single crew or truck.

"I first went to Gellibrand and the objective was to protect a house. We stopped the fire from getting too close as helicopters flew overhead dropping water on the fire. The helicopters were much louder than I expected.

"After that we were deployed to a fire next to a road, and used a monitor and hoses on the back to extinguish it. There were wood plantations nearby that needed protecting.

"As the night and day crews switched over at the Gellibrand resource centre, it was amazing to see so many people and vehicles. It was a massive set-up."

Despite being tired at the end of the shift, Wendy reflected on the experience with pride and gratitude. Her story is a reminder that quality training, supportive leadership and positive brigade culture empower members to step forward when it counts.

For members considering their first strike team deployment, Wendy's message is:

"Trust your training, lean on your crew, and give it a go."

"The confidence gained on the fireground is built long before deployment – through the effort, encouragement and shared commitment of the brigade."

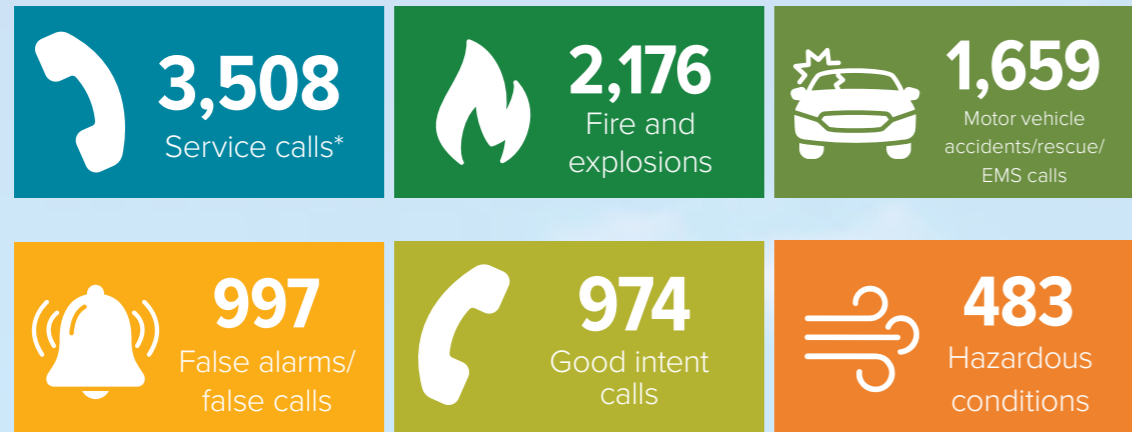
STORY ANDREW WILSON



Incident statistics

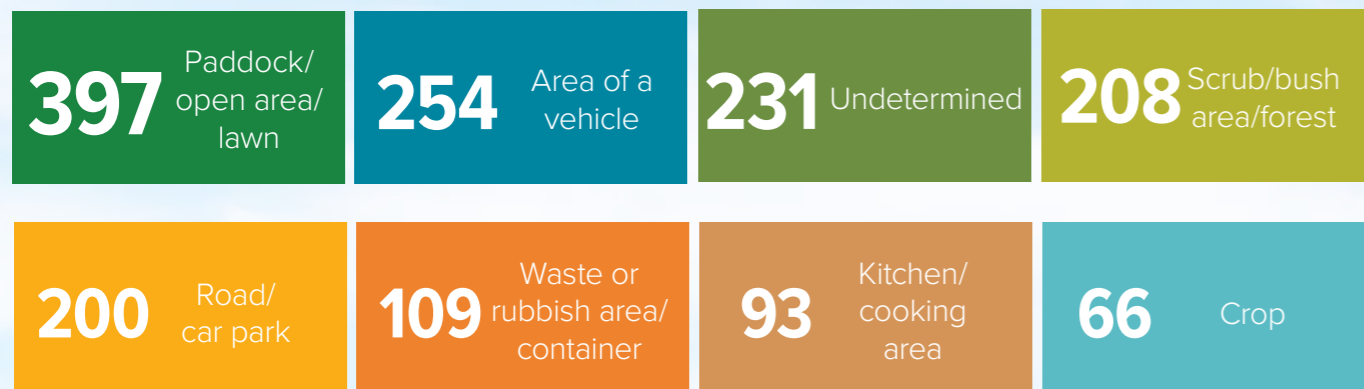
1 October 2025 to 31 December 2025

INCIDENTS BY TYPE



* Includes 2,717 callouts supporting FRV, 2 supporting DEECA, 5 supporting NSW

ORIGIN OF FIRE



INCIDENTS BY DISTRICT

SOUTH WEST		WEST		NORTH WEST		NORTH EAST		SOUTH EAST	
District	Incidents	District	Incidents	District	Incidents	District	Incidents	District	Incidents
4	70	15	676	2	563	12	314	8	2,327
5	156	16	163	14	1,703	13	837	9	284
6	161	17	146	18	312	22	505	10	178
7	592			20	316	23	270	11	207
						24	306	27	278

In brief

A round-up of shorter news items

CAFS TRAINING MODULE

For members who turn out to both urban and rural incidents, this 30-minute awareness course teaches you about the identification of foam properties, proportions, classifications, formulations and how to determine if use of compressed air foam systems (CAFS) is appropriate. It also includes knowledge of the features, benefits, limitations and safe application and operation of the system. No assessment is required.

Use the QR code to access the course on the Learning Hub.



NEW HEALTH RESOURCES

CFA Health Services has launched five new online health modules on the Learning Hub. Designed to support the health, safety and performance of our members, these resources give practical advice about: fatigue Management; heart health; healthy eating; physical activity and exercise; and posture and breathing.

These modules centralise key CFA resources, including SOPs, making essential information easier to find. We encourage all staff and volunteers to explore them.

Access the modules using the QR code or explore the Health Services page on Members Online. If you have any queries, email healthservices@cfa.vic.gov.au.



SAS RELEASE 12 INCLUDES APPLE CARPLAY

Release 12 of the Supplementary Alerting Service introduces Apple CarPlay, along with important maintenance updates and performance improvements. Like Android Auto, which was introduced in Release 9, Apple CarPlay will allow members to view and navigate to incidents via their car's built-in display. For iOS users Release 12 is compatible with iOS 26.1 and the two previous iOS versions.

Release 12 offers improvements to load times and performance of the home page, turnout tab and user settings. There are also improvements to Android compatibility to ensure SAS is aligned with newer Android features and security requirements.



NEW FLAIM VIRTUAL REALITY KITS

The upgraded kits are easier to use, more portable and designed specifically for training. They provide a highly-immersive and realistic experience to support both skills maintenance and skills acquisition.

VR training will be delivered as part of formal training programs and will be booked by CFA Learning & Development (L&D) teams. Skills maintenance modules are available now, and skills acquisition scenarios are currently being developed.

VR training significantly accelerates skills progression by allowing members to complete practical elements and gain competency sign-off immediately.

Use the QR code to find out more about FLAIM training and operation of the system.



TEMPLATE TOOLKIT EASIER TO USE

The Template Toolkit is a communications resource for both staff and volunteers, where you'll find lots of templates to help you produce professional-looking documents such as reports, posters, PowerPoint presentations, letters, brigade and group meeting templates, and much more. The toolkit also includes a suite of resources from the 'Give us a hand' recruitment campaign to help brigades with local advertising.

We recently updated the structure and features of the toolkit to make it easier to use, including links to the most popular templates on the home page and a search function.

Use the QR code to access the toolkit.



CFA BRAND, LOGO AND ENDORSEMENT

CFA and our brigades are regularly contacted by organisations and businesses who wish to support their local communities. Because our brand value is so strong, local brigades are often the first point of contact. New pages on Members Online have been created to help members understand permissions and rules associated with CFA's brand and give clear information about how, when and where it can be used.

There is advice about CFA's logo, copyright issues, photography, endorsement, and partnerships and sponsorships. Use the QR code to access the Members Online page.



Yarram Fire Brigade

*Original CFBB
minute book*



Newly-formed brigade, 1907



Brigade's first Dodge pumper, 1930s



Station loses roof and hose tower in storm, late 1980s



Current Yarram Fire Station



Brigade running team at Ballarat Demo, 1983



Temporary location at Ambulance Victoria depot, late 1980s

1900s

1910s

1920s

1930s

1940s

1950s

1960s

1970s

1980s

1990s

2000s

2010s

2020s

Today



Brigade members, 1920s



Yarram Fire Station, 1956



Tarra Festival parade, 1979

*District
10*



Toyota multi-purpose vehicle, 1998

POSTAGE
PAID
AUSTRALIA

PRINT
POST
100010934



Brigade

If undeliverable return to:
D&D Mailing Services
6/400 Princes Hwy
NOBLE PARK NORTH VIC 3174

Emergency Memberlink

The Emergency Memberlink program is a way for us to recognise your commitment and contribution to emergency services and Victorian communities.

By using Emergency Memberlink, you can receive discounts and benefits on a wide range of products and services in Victoria and interstate.

Details of the offers and full terms and conditions are at emergencymemberlink.com.au

To join Memberlink phone 1800 820 037 or register online at emergencymemberlink.com.au. You can also access your Memberlink card on the website.

The Memberlink team welcomes feedback about the program and your suggestions about benefits you think would be of value to you, your family and your colleagues. Phone the team or leave a message on the Emergency Memberlink Facebook page.



- **Travlux:** Unlock 12 months of First-Class VIP travel and save up to 50% on luxury stays and tours worldwide.
- **Accor Hotels:** Up to 10% off the best unrestricted rate of the day.
- **EG Ampol:** Save 3% on fuel with the fuel savings card (eGift card).
- **eGift cards:** Save up to 4% on grocery savings cards including Coles, Woolworths and Category Choice Grocery.
- **Insure&Go:** Save up to 15% on travel insurance.
- **Qantas Club:** Membership savings through the Member Benefits Corporate Scheme.
- **Avis:** Special car hire rates across Australia, including corporate leisure rates and reduced insurance excess.
- **endota spa:** Save 8% on eGift cards.
- **Village Roadshow Theme Parks:** Discounts available on passes, resorts and experiences.
- **SIXT Australia:** Up to 20% off passenger and commercial vehicle hire.
- **Spirit of Tasmania:** Save 5% on adult Spirit and Flexi fares.
- **Harvey Norman:** Access member pricing on appliances, electronics, furniture, bedding and home essentials through Groups & Associations.
- **Best Western Hotels & Resorts:** Save 15% on accommodation at participating Australian and New Zealand properties.
- **PetsOnMe Insurance:** Up to two months free plus 6% back on annual premiums and 12% off services.
- **RSEA Safety:** Save 10% on full-priced items in-store.
- **Phillip Island Nature Parks:** Save 20% on the three Parks Pass covering Penguin Parade, Koala Conservation Reserve and Churchill Island.
- **Experience Oz:** Save 10% on attractions, zoos and theme parks.
- **Searoad Ferries:** Save 10% on ferry travel between Sorrento and Queenscliff.
- **Village Cinemas:** Discounted VIC/TAS eVouchers and combo deals.
- **McDonald's Vic:** Free small McCafé hot drink, small soft drink or orange juice with a minimum \$5 spend.
- **Hotel Planner:** Access special hotel rates across Australia with online booking.
- **Specsavers Optometrists:** Year-round member discounts.
- **Doctors on Demand:** \$5 off a video consult and no booking fee.
- **Virgin Australia:** Save \$170 on Lounge memberships.
- **Europcar:** Up to 15% off daily rental rates.
- **The Good Guys Commercial Division:** Access member pricing on appliances and electronics.
- **JB Hi-Fi Corporate Benefits Program:** Savings on tech, entertainment and fitness gear.
- **Budget Rent a Car:** 10% off Australian car rentals.
- **Archie Brothers:** Buy a \$50 game card for \$23 which can be used on arcade games, prizes and cocktails.
- **mycar Tyre & Auto:** 10% off servicing, repairs and TCP tyre purchases.
- **Bridgestone:** Save 15% on tyres through the Business Associates Program.
- **Marshall Batteries:** \$20 off a fitted replacement battery with 24/7 mobile roadside assistance.
- **AJH New Car Brokers:** \$250 off brokerage fees plus fleet pricing and VIP delivery.
- **iSubscribe:** Save 10% on magazine subscriptions including Better Homes & Gardens and National Geographic.
- **Nissan:** Fleet pricing and added benefits on selected new vehicles.