Helen Haines MP

Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee
Parliament House
East Melbourne
VIC 3002

To the committee,

Re: Inquiry into the 2026 summer fires across Victoria

The January 2026 bushfires have devastated communities in the federal electorate of Indi, and it is on their behalf that I make this submission to the Environment and Planning Committee's inquiry.

Bushfires are something the people of Indi know all too well. As I've travelled through affected towns, I've seen the same thing I always do: communities showing up for each other, town halls turned into relief centres, neighbours helping neighbours, people giving all they can.

However, our resilience is not limitless. For many communities, this is the second or third catastrophic disaster in just a few years. What were once-in-a-century events are now happening once-in-a-decade, or even more often.

This is the lived reality of my electorate. Across two fires in Indi, known as the Longwood Fire and the Walwa River Road Fire, approximately 300 homes were destroyed (more than 75 per cent of Victoria's total), and over 250,000 hectares have been burnt. The impact on primary production and agricultural businesses has been catastrophic.

In this submission, I discuss key concerns raised by members of my communities in the immediate aftermath of the bushfires, and in the following weeks and months. I have focused my submission on areas of interface between the Victorian and Commonwealth governments. My recommendations pertain to areas of joint responsibility, or areas of Commonwealth responsibility in which the Victorian Government has a crucial role in advocating for investment and regulation to improve the safety and resilience of Victorian communities.

I wish the Committee well in its inquiry and look forward to reading a final report with strong recommendations that ensure we are better prepared for the next bushfire season.

Yours faithfully,

Dr Helen Haines MP

7 April 2026

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INDEPENDENT FEDERAL MEMBER FOR INDI

Summary of Recommendations

Recommendation 1: The Victorian Government works with the cross-border commissioners to develop formal cross-border aged care evacuation protocols between Victoria and New South Wales covering ambulance access, patient transport, and decision-making authority for residents.

Recommendation 2: The Department of Health should establish a single operational point of contact for each aged care service during a disaster, supported by shared information systems across relevant agencies, to reduce duplication and ensure requests for assistance are actioned appropriately.

Recommendation 3: The Committee should consider whether mental health funding could be delivered more effectively, especially for communities without close access to an existing Mental Health and Wellbeing Local.

Recommendation 4: The Victorian Government works with the National Emergency Management Agency and the Commonwealth Government to review the Australian Government Disaster Recovery Payment to improve timeframes and reduce perverse eligibility processes and outcomes.

Recommendation 5: The Victorian Government must more effectively communicate the activation triggers for Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements.

Recommendation 6: The Victorian Government must work with both local governments and the Commonwealth to ensure all stakeholders in the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements understand their responsibilities and requirements.

Recommendation 7: The Victorian Government should agree to betterment funding when agreed to by the National Emergency Management Agency.

Recommendation 8: The Victorian Government advocate to the Commonwealth Government for a review of the *Local Government (Financial Assistance) Act 1995*, including the national principles for the distribution of the Financial Assistance Grants.

Recommendation 9: Provide additional funding to the Regional Worker Accommodation Fund for transitional bushfire accommodation that would then transition to key worker accommodation.

Recommendation 10: The Victorian Government must continue its advocacy to the Commonwealth Government to deploy temporary disaster roaming before the next severe fire season arrives.

Recommendation 11: The Victorian Government should advocate to the Commonwealth Government to legislate minimum power backup periods for critical telecommunications sites, and to expand the Mobile Network Hardening Program to increase power backup to 24 hours at all phone towers in high-risk areas.

Recommendation 12: Regional Development Victoria to undertake a comprehensive economic impact assessment of the January 2026 fires across all affected LGAs, quantifying losses across industry, agriculture, tourism and small business.

Introduction

The electorate of Indi is no stranger to bushfires. In the first quarter of this century, we've endured the Black Saturday Bushfires, the Black Summer Bushfires, and now the January 2026 bushfires.

Across two fires in Indi, known as the Longwood Fire and the Walwa River Road Fire, approximately 300 homes were destroyed, along with thousands of kilometres of fencing and countless sheds and agricultural assets. Across both fires, more than 250,000 hectares have been burnt.

In listening to people across Indi in the days and weeks after the fire front passed on 9 January, clear themes emerged: widespread frustration with the lack of clear, consistent communication from authorities, and a strong sense that there is still much work to do to improve how communities and government agencies interact in bushfires and other emergency situations.

Key areas of frustration included inconsistent enforcement of road closures and convoy protocols, inconsistent information regarding access to euthanasia and stock disposal services, and significant inertia in State authority support to remove trees and hazards, which impeded cleanup and the construction of emergency fencing and other urgent stock management infrastructure.

As the independent member for the federal electorate of Indi, I have focused my submission on areas of interface between the Victorian and Commonwealth governments. My recommendations pertain to areas of joint responsibility, or areas of Commonwealth responsibility in which the Victorian Government has a crucial role in advocating for investment and regulation to improve the safety and resilience of Victorian communities.

I would welcome the opportunity to appear as a witness before the Committee and strongly encourage the Committee to conduct a public hearing in my electorate, ideally in the most severely affected municipalities such as in Murrindindi, Strathbogie, and Towong shires.

Aged Care

The January 2026 bushfires have exposed weaknesses in evacuation arrangements for aged care services and health services in cross-border communities. My discussions with local health services indicate that some aged care providers were not suitably connected into incident management structures from the outset, despite being responsible for evacuating highly vulnerable residents, which required timely, authoritative operational information.

The most significant issues appear to have occurred in relation to cross-border coordination in the Upper Murray. The evacuation of patients and residents from Corryong Health was self-managed due to a lack of access to formal evacuation transport support from Victorian services specifically attributable to geographical remoteness. Corryong was inaccessible to other Victorian facilities due to road closures and hence knew early that all personnel needed to be transported into New South Wales. Currently, there aren't any agencies that support health services to transition aged care residents from one facility to another, through a global understanding of where vacant beds exist. In a crisis, Corryong Health staff were left to contact individual facilities and find beds – a time consuming, yet critical process. In an environment where 'demand is greater than supply' – it could have been a fruitless task. Fortunately, beds were found within a 200km radius at multiple facilities, however, the next vital task was self-managing the transition. Corryong Health utilised their own resident mini-bus and arranged for a second mini-bus to be borrowed from Corryong College, late at night, to transport patients directly into NSW Aged Care Facilities.

The evacuation of residents to unfamiliar facilities creates additional safety and care-quality risks for older persons, particularly where continuity of care is disrupted. It is clear that there is need for better interoperability between Commonwealth, Victorian and New South Wales systems, and a more realistic emergency planning model for rural and remote aged care services such as those in the Upper Murray.

I note the evacuation processes of aged care facilities were highly relevant in other Victorian fires that occurred in January 2026, including the Natimuk fire.

Recommendation: The Victorian Government works with the cross-border commissioners to develop formal cross-border aged care evacuation protocols between Victoria and New South Wales covering ambulance access, patient transport, and decision-making authority for residents.

Recommendation: The Department of Health should establish a single operational point of contact for each aged care service during a disaster, supported by shared information systems across relevant agencies, to reduce duplication and ensure requests for assistance are actioned appropriately.

Mental Health Funding

Fires are highly traumatising events, and have effects that linger days, months and years after an event.

Supporting the mental health of affected individuals and communities is a challenge for governments and must be informed by best practice and be locally embedded wherever possible within existing community structures and networks.

Unfortunately, the first few months following the January 2026 fires have raised concerns regarding the Victorian Government's administration of Commonwealth funding for mental health support.

In Murrindindi Shire, around one third of the shire was burned, thousands of kilometres of fencing and farm infrastructure was burnt, and almost 200 homes were lost. Exacerbating the acute effects of the 2026 fires is the legacy of the 2009 Black Summer bushfires, which devastated the Murrindindi Shire and remain a significant source of trauma and grief for many individuals and communities.

Yet the principal funding response relies heavily on the existing Mental Health and Wellbeing Local model, despite Murrindindi not being within the catchment of any Mental Health and Wellbeing Local service.

In practice, this means many bushfire-affected residents are expected to travel long distances, often without public transport, to access mental health support. Support available on the ground is welcome but doesn't form part of the community's existing support and service networks. This approach is inconsistent with trauma-informed disaster recovery and creates a real risk that those most in need will miss out on support altogether.

Murrindindi Shire has told me that providers such as Yea and District Memorial Hospital, Alexandra District Health, and the Lower Hume Primary Mental Health Service already have the capability and community trust to deliver outreach, follow-up care and therapeutic support, but are managing significantly increased demand without adequate resourcing.

The Victorian Government's mental health funding for bushfire-affected communities should enable flexible, locally managed mental health recovery funding and ensure that delivery models reflect the National Disaster Mental Health and Wellbeing Framework, including continuity of care, local access, and long-term recovery rather than short-term externally delivered services.

Recommendation: The Committee must consider whether mental health funding could be delivered more effectively, especially for communities without close access to an existing Mental Health and Wellbeing Local.

Australian Government Disaster Recovery Payment (AGDRP)

Unlike the Disaster Recovery Allowance, which determines eligibility at the local government area level, the AGDRP requires a locality-by-locality listing based on primary assessments of damage.

Having engaged closely with my constituents, I have multiple concerns about the current design of the AGDRP.

Firstly, I believe the AGDRP is too narrowly targeted. AGDRP assistance is intended for individuals whose primary residence has been destroyed, significantly damaged, or where a family member has been killed or seriously injured. It does not cover losses to non-residential assets such as sheds or fencing; water infrastructure, despite the financial and emotional toll this damage imposes on regional landholders.

Secondly, I am concerned that a complex two-step eligibility process has caused additional grief and trauma for people who have already suffered so much in recent months. To receive the AGDRP residents must first have their locality listed, and then prove their losses meet the eligibility criteria.

The first step has traumatised people whose locality was clearly impacted – with multiple homes destroyed – but who were forced to wait days or weeks for their localities to be listed. This often occurred many days after a neighbouring electorate that experienced a comparable amount of damage, with no apparent reason for why one town was listed much earlier than another.

This complex process has delayed assistance, with many residents advocating for their locality's inclusion despite it being obvious that there was a catastrophic impact, and when they should be focusing on their immediate recovery. Additionally, even after a locality was finally listed, people need to substantiate individual losses, which is especially challenging for those who lost significant assets but not their homes. Cumulatively, this two-step eligibility process caused further harm to many people.

Similar concerns regarding delay, uncertainty and the emotional toll of the locality-by-locality listing process have been formally conveyed by councils to Commonwealth Ministers, reinforcing that these issues are systemic rather than isolated.

Given that eligibility for the AGDRP is primarily predicated on proving destruction or significant damage to your home, or serious injury or death, it is not clear why geographical eligibility couldn't be determined at LGA-level. If you can prove your house has been destroyed or damaged, it simply should not matter which side of an arbitrary locality boundary you are on.

Setting eligibility at an LGA-level would avoid the absurdity of locality-by-locality listings that only served to anger, upset, and traumatise people in the days following a catastrophic bushfire. That isn't fair.

Recommendation: The Victorian Government work with the National Emergency Management Agency and the Commonwealth Government to review the Australian Government Disaster Recovery Payment to improve timeframes and reduce perverse eligibility processes and outcomes.

Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements

The Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements are a key source of recovery support for communities and local governments in my electorate. As the interface between Commonwealth and local governments, the Victorian Government has an important role to play in the delivery of disaster recovery funding, and in supporting local governments to access and apply for necessary funding.

In discussions with communities and local governments in my electorate, I believe more work is needed to support local governments to understand how to leverage the disaster recovery funding arrangements for their communities, particularly in relation to funding for betterment.

For example, local governments in my electorate frequently state that NEMA-approved betterment proposals are rejected by the Victorian Government, holding back recovery and ensuring infrastructure remains vulnerable to future disasters. They say to me that the Victorian Government must provide more clarity on its processes for determining whether it will support co-funding of betterment requests. Rural local governments would prefer that the Victorian Government and the National Emergency Management Agency work more closely to agree on betterment funding requests.

This concern is reflected in formal council advocacy, which consistently calls for closer alignment between Victorian Government decision-making and National Emergency Management Agency approved betterment proposals to avoid entrenching vulnerability in rebuilt infrastructure.

A further issue in my electorate was that two fires in the 2025-26 fire season – in Goomalibee (Benalla Rural City) and Markwood (Rural City of Wangaratta) – did not trigger an activation of the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements, despite people losing their homes and significant assets.

My office conducted extensive work with both the Commonwealth and Victorian Minister to advocate on behalf of these communities. While one fire in Goomalibee was eventually made eligible, the fire in Markwood has not been. Ultimately, this seems to be due to technical activation requirements that require substantiation of public asset damage or local government costs in order to trigger support at the individual level. These triggers are poorly understood by the community, and contributed to significant frustration and anger within those communities. People contacted my office asking why they weren't eligible for support, when the impact on them was the same as someone in Koetong or Kanumbra and this is a fair argument. I believe the Victorian Government, in conjunction with NEMA, must review the thresholds at which DRFA arrangements are activated for residents, and communicate these more effectively to the public.

Recommendation: The Victorian Government must more effectively communicate the activation triggers for Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements.

Recommendation: The Victorian Government must work with both local governments and the Commonwealth to ensure all stakeholders in the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements understand their responsibilities and the requirements.

Recommendation: The Victorian Government should agree to betterment funding when agreed to by the National Emergency Management Agency.

Local Government Financial Sustainability

We cannot consider the recovery of bushfire affected communities and their local governments without considering the broader structural challenges they face.

As the Victorian Local Government Grants Commission (VLGGC) notes in its submission to a Commonwealth inquiry into local government financial sustainability, "not only are the needs for rural councils for financial assistance greater than those of other councils, those needs are ***increasing on a relative basis over time***" (emphasis my own).

Over the past decade, the 'raw needs' of metropolitan councils in Victoria has increased by just under 10%, but for small rural councils the increase is more than 35% over the same period.

The VLGGC is blunt in its assessment that "in the absence of an increase in the size of the funding pool or changes to the national distribution principles, the Commission's ability to further improve the funding outcomes for rural councils is significantly constrained".

These findings align with evidence provided by rural councils, including Murrindindi Shire, to Commonwealth inquiries, which highlight that disaster recovery pressures are compounding long-standing structural funding inequities faced by small rural local governments.

It is therefore incumbent on the Victorian Government to advocate for reforms to the Financial Assistance Grants, and the broader suite of Commonwealth grants provided to local governments, to address the structural funding inequities faced by Victoria's rural local governments.

Recommendation: The Victorian Government advocate to the Commonwealth Government for a review of the Local Government (Financial Assistance) Act 1995, including the national principles for the distribution of the Financial Assistance Grants.

Key Infrastructure Requests

Recovery and resilience-building for communities must be supported through practical investments in key recovery and resilience projects, such as the following examples:

- **Alexandra Stadium and Emergency Relief Centre** – $11.0 million.
- **Ruffy Community Resilience Hub Redevelopment** – $1.2 million.
- **Mansfield Shire Emergency Services Precinct (Stage 1)** – $18.85 million.
- **Upgraded Relief and Recovery Hubs and Staging Centres** – $2.6 million.

Support for local government must align as much as possible with council's own priorities. I note that multiple fire-affected shires in my council have adopted or otherwise published post-bushfire advocacy documents. These include Strathbogie Shire's Disaster Advocacy Strategy, and Murrindindi Shire's Bushfire Advocacy Priorities. I note both shires, as well as Towong Shire, have made submissions to the inquiry and should be invited to appear as witnesses before the Committee.

A consistent issue raised by councils is that the full economic impact of a fire is not captured by headline figures such as homes lost or hectares burned. Many of the most significant costs sit with small businesses, primary producers and their supply chains—through fencing and livestock losses, lost production, cancelled bookings, disrupted freight and staffing, and the flow-on effects of prolonged road closures, reduced tourism, and power and telecommunications outages. A whole-of-fire assessment, with transparent LGA-level data, would provide common evidence base for recovery planning and funding decisions, help target assistance to the places and sectors most affected (including agriculture, tourism and small business), and support consistent advocacy across affected municipalities.

Recommendation: Regional Development Victoria to undertake a comprehensive economic impact assessment of the January 2026 fires across all affected LGAs, quantifying losses across industry, agriculture, tourism and small business.

Housing

After a bushfire, housing needs are urgent, with crisis accommodation required to be deployed quickly. In the longer term, families and communities require transitional accommodation while the long road to rebuilding occurs, which for many households can take several years.

Fire affected councils, including Murrindindi Shire, have indicated that locally led accommodation projects can be delivered quickly where funding is available, providing transitional housing for displaced residents while also addressing long-term key worker shortages.

Given the provision of appropriate housing is a key responsibility of all three levels of Government, I have worked closely with my communities to access both Victorian and Commonwealth government housing funding.

This includes Murrindindi's Shire's successful Eildon Key Worker Housing project, funded through the Victorian Government's Regional Worker Accommodation Fund.

With this project nearing completion, Murrindindi Shire has indicated to me that they are ready to deliver similar projects in the short-term. With established relationships and supply chains in place, and with appropriate council-owned land identified in the Murrindindi Shire's Key Worker Housing Strategy, Murrindindi Shire believes it could roll out further accommodation projects in a short timeframe. They propose that funding be granted to deliver key worker housing that could serve an

interim purpose of providing transitional accommodation for bushfire-affected communities. Over time, the accommodation would transition to key worker accommodation.

The Victorian Government's existing Regional Worker Accommodation Fund could be expanded through a closed or one-off grant round to achieve this dual-purpose of providing crisis and transitional accommodation to bushfire-affected households, and the longer-term objective of providing key worker accommodation.

Recommendation: Provide additional funding to the Regional Worker Accommodation Fund for transitional bushfire accommodation that would then transition to key worker accommodation.

Power Security

Extended power outages during the January 2026 bushfires compounded the danger faced by communities across Indi. In the Upper Murray, the Euroa district and elsewhere, my office has heard from constituents who experienced prolonged power outages or the anxiety caused by an acute awareness of the fragility or rural power supplies. As a case in point, the Alexandra ICC had to move to Seymour due to power outages.

In the days leading up to the 9th of January, my office heard from multiple residents of the Upper Murray concerned about the fragility of the single power line running along the Murray Valley Highway, and its potential impact by fire. Anna – a resident of Cudgewa – told me that "if the fire reaches the Murray Valley Highway today or tomorrow, we could lose power (as we just have the one power line running in along that road) and then possibly lose all communications too".

Unfortunately, this is precisely what came to pass the following day, with thousands of people across the Upper Murray experiencing prolonged power outages in the midst of emergency warnings to evacuate, with the fire spreading rapidly.

When the power goes off, people cannot charge phones, access the internet, receive warnings or contact family and emergency services. I have consistently argued that when mains power fails, critical communications infrastructure such as mobile towers often goes offline as well, leaving whole towns isolated right when reliable information and connectivity are needed most.

Power loss also heightens practical risks: residents struggled to coordinate evacuations, check on vulnerable neighbours, access medical support and safely manage stock and property during rapidly changing conditions. Communities have provided many examples of how power outages compounded risk during the January 2026 bushfires.

Case study: Tatong (Benalla Rural City) – A long-term resident of Tatong, Jenny, contacted my office to share her concerns regarding the increasing frequency of power outages and their impact on her family's safety. During one weekend this summer, Jenny's household endured two separate outages

caused by AusNet—one lasting close to 24 hours and another around six hours. These incidents were in addition to several other outages experienced earlier in the year.

Although the local mobile tower and copper phone exchange in Tatong are equipped with battery backup systems, Jenny noted that these backups only provided about 90 minutes of service once mains power was lost. After this period, her family was left without any reliable means of communication, unable to make calls or receive information, despite maintaining a landline specifically for emergencies.

Jenny described the heightened anxiety her family felt, knowing that in the event of a bushfire or another disaster, a medical emergency—such as an accident or cardiac event—could occur when communications infrastructure was unavailable.

Case Study: BN11 Express Feeder (Strathbogie Shire) – The January 2026 bushfires underscored the vulnerability of rural communities served by extensive, radial electricity networks. Strathbogie Shire Council has raised concerns regarding the AusNet BN11 feeder, which stretches approximately 1,201 kilometres and is the longest single-line feeder within AusNet's Victorian network. This feeder supplies Euroa, Violet Town and the surrounding districts, but its limited redundancy and exposure to bushfire-prone terrain leave communities at significant risk when faults occur.

Since the rollout of Rapid-Emitting Fault Current Limiters (REFCL) bushfire technology in 2023, outages have become both more frequent and prolonged. Restoration efforts often require physical inspection of extensive sections of the network, further delaying power return. AusNet has paid approximately $1.3 million in compensation, yet ongoing reliability issues remain unresolved. During the 2026 fires, these extended outages triggered cascading failures across essential services: telecommunications sites with limited backup power went offline, EFTPOS and fuel access were disrupted, and households faced serious medical and safety risks as powered devices, refrigeration and water pumping systems were compromised.

In response, the Strathbogie Shire Council is advocating for the approval of AusNet's proposed BN11 Express Feeder upgrade. This upgrade aims to provide route diversity and enable faster sectional restoration. The Victorian Government holds a key responsibility to ensure that regional equity and community safety are prioritised within regulatory and resilience decisions, including supporting investment that strengthens essential services in areas with high bushfire risk.

Strathbogie Shire Council has formally adopted a disaster advocacy strategy identifying electricity reliability and network redundancy as critical risk multipliers during bushfires, particularly where extended outages cascade into telecommunications and fuel access failures.

Case study: Bethanga, Bellbridge and Talgarno (Towong Shire) – The Mayor of Towong Shire has contacted my office reporting ongoing, unresolved electricity unreliability affecting Bethanga, Bellbridge and Talgarno, including further deterioration during hot weather and peak demand.

For the communities of the Upper Murray, power instability creates significant risks for residents reliant on electric pumps for household water and firefighting capacity, and the loss of phone reception when power-dependent mobile infrastructure goes offline, leaving people unable to receive warnings or call for assistance during fire events. Repeated summer outages have also disrupted local businesses, schools, childcare and healthcare services, increasing community anxiety.

Telecommunications

Temporary Disaster Roaming

It is past time that Governments and telecommunications providers deploy temporary disaster roaming.

When bushfires, floods or storms hit, Australians should be able to roam onto any available mobile network to make emergency calls or receive warnings. It is achievable and has been implemented in other countries, but the Commonwealth Government has delayed temporary disaster roaming for more than two years.

The issue of temporary disaster roaming was discussed in Regional Development Victoria's Ovens Murray Digital Plan, alongside the need for stronger advocacy to the Commonwealth Government for further investment in digital connectivity.

The Victorian Emergency Management Commissioner stated in November 2023 that "the Victorian Government has supported the development of an emergency roaming capability since the 2019-20 bushfires. Emergency roaming can provide a vital link when telecommunications services are impacted by natural disasters".

He proceeded to note that the Commonwealth Government said in October 2023 that it would work with industry to scope temporary disaster roaming. The Commonwealth Government has provided no public update since, other than in response to my questions to the federal Minister for Communications.

It is too late to help communities devastated by fires in my electorate this year, but it is not too late to implement temporary disaster roaming before the next fire season. The Victorian Government must push the Commonwealth to move faster.

Recommendation: The Victorian Government must continue its advocacy to the Commonwealth Government to deploy temporary disaster roaming before the next severe fire season arrives.

Mandatory Power Backup

I have been a long-time advocate for more resilient regional telecommunications, including through the 2024 Regional Telecommunications Review.

The January 2026 fires again saw mobile phone towers and other critical infrastructure go offline due to unavoidable mains power outages. Assets with on-site power backup fared better, often staying online for hours and days during the most important phase of the emergency response – the first 72 hours.

One resident of Highlands told my office, following 5 days without power after the fire front had passed, that "in the future these towers in this area definitely need to be equipped with permanent backup generators." He believed that "lives are at risk. Having the power and reception down for this long is completely unacceptable… I regard this event as an utter failure of government and essential services."

Communities in my electorate wish to see a minimum level of power backup for all phone towers and critical assets in high bushfire-risk areas. It's a policy I've long campaigned for.

Specifically**, I am advocating for the Commonwealth Government to implement minimum power backup standards for critical telecommunications infrastructure in high-risk areas as a priority**.

The Victorian Government's Independent Review of Transmission and Distribution Businesses Operational Response to the February 2024 Storm and Power Outage Event (the Network Outage Review) noted that "essential services need at least 72 hours of backup energy supply so they can continue providing their service to the community" and that "long duration battery energy storage solutions also deliver more reliable power supply to key infrastructure by deploying solar generation that can support power loads for 24 hours". The Network Outage Review recommended that governments work towards 72 hours of telecommunications redundancy.

The Victorian Government supported this recommendation, and said that "while telecommunications policy is managed federally, the Victorian Government has a significant interest in increasing resilience and reliability outcomes for Victorian communities… and will continue to advocate for stronger regional telecommunications resilience and reliability outcomes". It further said that "The Victorian Government recognises the role it can play in working with the Commonwealth Government and the telecommunications industry for more resilient and reliable telecommunications services."

Councils in fire-affected areas have likewise emphasised that telecommunications resilience is inseparable from power security, and that insufficient backup power at critical sites undermines community safety during prolonged emergency events.

It is therefore appropriate the Victorian Government advocate strongly – in direct response to the January 2026 bushfires – for further Commonwealth funding for the Mobile Network Hardening Program, and for regulations that requirement Mobile Network Operators to work towards a minimum of 24-hour power backup for all critical telecommunications towers and assets in high bushfire-risk areas.

Case study: Tony from Yea – A resident of Yea, Tony, described how towns can lose communications even when telecommunications infrastructure is not damaged by fire. On Saturday 10 January 2026, Alexandra and Yea reportedly lost mobile and internet connectivity after prolonged mains power outages drained backup batteries at Telstra and Optus sites. Tony noted similar failures in earlier floods, when access constraints delayed generator deployment. The result was total isolation at the moment when VicEmergency alerts, Triple Zero access, family check-ins and coordination with CFA/SES were most vital. Tony also described the fear that followed the communications blackout while he stayed to defend his home, unable to monitor rapidly changing conditions. He argues that modest-cost, permanent backup power (for example, generators with automatic transfer switches and adequate fuel) at key sites could prevent repeat blackouts and urged faster deployment through programs such as the Mobile Network Hardening Program. He told my office that "the anxiety, fear, frustration and indeed the anger I felt on Saturday, knowing we had perfectly intact and otherwise fully operational equipment (but for not having a relatively inexpensive ATS generator attached) I cannot fully describe."

Recommendation: The Victorian Government should advocate to the Commonwealth Government to legislate minimum power backup periods for critical telecommunications sites, and to expand the Mobile Network Hardening Program to increase power backup to a minimum of 24 hours at all phone towers in high-risk areas.

Conclusion

The recovery needs of communities in my electorate are immense and must involve the participation of all levels of Government.

Having visited fire-affected communities in the Upper Murray and central tablelands, there is a palpable desire/belief the Victorian Government must do more to support bushfire recovery.

This must include further funding for mental health support, community recovery committees, and primary producers devastated by fencing and livestock losses.

It must also include strong advocacy by the Victorian Government to the Commonwealth to ensure key investments in telecommunications hardening and power security occur.

The issues raised in this submission are not unique to individual communities but reflect a consistent set of concerns articulated by local governments across my electorate in their own post-bushfire advocacy to state and Commonwealth governments.

I wish the committee the best in its inquiry and look forward to reading a strong final report that outlines the many improvements we must make before the next bushfire season arrives. I look forward to working alongside my state counterparts to ensure that progress is made.