



FFMVic Under Fire

35 Years of Risk and
Reform in Victoria

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A Candid Report on Leadership, Policy, and Bushfire Risk from 1990 to 2025

How did Victoria go from the ashes of Black Friday to the infernos of Black Saturday and Black Summer—despite decades of reform?

This timely and compelling report exposes the truth about Victoria's fire services: the complexity, the confusion, the leadership gaps, and the consequences for community safety. From flawed fuel strategies to fragmented firefighting structures, this is a deep dive into a system under strain.

Blending lived experience, expert insight, and AI-supported analysis, FFMVic Under Fire delivers bold recommendations for change—backed by evidence and driven by urgency.

If we are to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past, the time to act is now.

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Executive Summary

Overview

Over the last three and a half decades, the way Victoria manages bushfire risk has dramatically changed. This report takes a critical look at how those changes—especially the creation and evolution of Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMVic)—have shaped fire safety outcomes between 1990 and 2025.

Originally designed to improve how we manage fire risk on public land, FFMVic has instead become part of a complex system that, in some ways, has made things worse. Our analysis, drawn from public inquiries, royal commissions, agency reviews, and community feedback, shows that repeated restructures, inconsistent leadership, and unclear strategies have left Victoria more exposed to major bushfires than ever before.

From Black Saturday in 2009 to the devastating 2019–20 “Black Summer,” and following the controversial 2020 Fire Services Reform, this report examines the decisions, delays, and missed opportunities that have defined the state's bushfire strategy.

Key Themes

This report is built around three core themes that have had the greatest impact on fire safety:

- **Structural Reform**

Since 1990, Victoria’s emergency services have undergone major structural shifts. What was once a CFA-led, volunteer-focused system has evolved into a fragmented web of responsibilities. FFMVic was introduced to consolidate fire management on public land under a single brand, but its emergence also created confusion, overlap, and disconnect between agencies. Unlike New South Wales, where the Rural Fire Service leads bushfire response across all land types, Victoria's split model between CFA (private land) and FFMVic (public land) has complicated efforts to mount a unified response to fast-moving fires.

- **Leadership Accountability**

Leadership matters—and too often, it’s been found lacking. Across multiple royal commissions and reviews, senior figures have been criticized for poor decision-making, inadequate warnings, or inaction. While some resigned under public pressure, these moments rarely sparked lasting reform. Instead, a risk-averse culture took hold, where fear of blame outweighed the drive to reduce risk. New leadership roles such as the Emergency Management Commissioner were created to centralize accountability, but bureaucracy often stood in the way of bold, decisive action.

- **Fuel Management Strategy**

Reducing bushfire fuel—through planned burning or other methods—is essential. Yet, Victoria’s approach has been inconsistent and politically charged. While the 2009 Royal Commission demanded a bold target of burning 5% of public land each year, that target was abandoned in 2015 in favor of a more flexible “residual risk” model. Unfortunately, this shift led to a sharp drop in actual burning. In some regions, fuel levels today are as dangerous as they were before Black Saturday.

The Bigger Picture

The consequences of these failings are seen in the increasing size, intensity, and cost of bushfires across the state. Fires like those in 2003, 2006–07, 2009, and 2019–20 have stretched Victoria’s firefighting capacity and left communities traumatized and questioning whether enough is being done.

Problems with interagency coordination, delays in fire response, and a steady decline in frontline personnel—especially in volunteer numbers—have made it harder to respond effectively. Meanwhile, communities continue to express frustration at being sidelined or ignored in decisions that affect their safety.

What Needs to Change

This report calls for major reforms to restore public confidence and reduce fire risk. Key recommendations include:

- Rebuilding a more unified, integrated fire service structure
- Holding leadership truly accountable for results, not just process
- Reviving an ambitious, landscape-scale fuel reduction program
- Boosting coordination between agencies and rebuilding workforce capacity
- Reconnecting with communities and genuinely including them in fire planning

The time for fragmented systems and paper promises is over. If Victoria is to avoid repeating the tragedies of the past, bold and decisive action is needed now.

Introduction

Bushfires have long been a defining feature of life in Victoria. For more than a century, fires have threatened lives, homes, and landscapes across the state. Over the past three and a half decades, the way Victoria manages this ever-present danger has changed dramatically. Central to that transformation is the emergence of Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMVic), a body now leading fire management on public land.

This report tells the story of how fire management in Victoria evolved between 1990 and 2025. It examines whether the changes introduced during this period—particularly the establishment of FFMVic and the shift away from a Country Fire Authority (CFA)-dominated model—have made Victorians safer, or more vulnerable.

Drawing on royal commissions, inspector-general reviews, independent audits, and case studies, this is not just a record of policy shifts and operational reforms. It is also a candid reflection on missed opportunities, leadership failures, and the rising risks that continue to threaten communities. Whether you are an emergency services leader, a government official,

or simply a concerned citizen, the goal of this report is to inform, provoke discussion, and help drive action.

With the increasing threat of climate change and the memory of disasters like Black Saturday and Black Summer still fresh, this analysis comes at a critical time. Victoria cannot afford to repeat the mistakes of the past. Understanding what went wrong—and what can be done better—is the first step toward a safer future.

Purpose and Scope

At the heart of this report is a single guiding question: how has Forest Fire Management Victoria, and the wider system it operates within, contributed to declining fire safety outcomes in Victoria between 1990 and 2025?

To answer this, the report focuses on three key areas of analysis. First, it looks at structural reform—how changes to Victoria’s fire and land management agencies have affected coordination, clarity of roles, and frontline capability. Second, it explores leadership accountability, examining whether political and agency leaders have taken responsibility for outcomes and whether lessons from past failures have led to meaningful change. Third, it evaluates the state’s fuel management strategy, including prescribed burning and other risk reduction efforts, and whether these have been applied consistently and effectively.

Each of these areas is considered within the broader context of Victoria’s unique fire risk profile. The report recognises the growing influence of climate change, population growth, and land-use development in bushfire-prone areas. It also examines how public expectations and agency cultures have shaped decision-making over time.

This is not an academic paper, nor is it a technical manual. It is a clear, evidence-based account of how fire management has changed—and what must happen next if Victoria is to avoid another catastrophic bushfire disaster.

How We Got Here: A Brief History of Victoria’s Fire Services

To understand where things went wrong—and how to fix them—we first need to understand how Victoria’s bushfire management system came to be. By 1990, Victoria’s fire services had already been shaped by decades of reform, much of it in response to previous disasters. The Country Fire Authority (CFA), established in 1944 after the catastrophic Black Friday fires of 1939, had long been the backbone of rural firefighting. Staffed by tens of thousands of dedicated volunteers, the CFA was responsible for protecting private land and country towns across the state.

Meanwhile, fires on public land—including national parks and state forests—were managed by various government departments. Over the years, these departments changed names and structures, evolving from the Forests Commission to the Department of Natural Resources and Environment, then to the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE), and eventually to today's Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA). This side of the fire services equation was primarily focused on land management, employing rangers, foresters, and seasonal firefighters known as Project Fire Fighters.

For decades, these two systems—CFA and the state land management agencies—operated in parallel. In theory, they worked together, especially during major fires. But in practice, they often struggled with coordination, differing cultures, and blurred lines of responsibility. The CFA was community-based and volunteer-led. The land management agencies were government-run and more bureaucratic. These differences mattered—especially when fires crossed boundaries between public and private land.

Efforts were made to bridge the divide. After the devastating Ash Wednesday fires in 1983, joint training programs were introduced, and both sides began using a common command system called AIIMS (the Australasian Inter-Service Incident Management System). They also began co-locating control centres during major incidents. But even with these improvements, the relationship remained uneasy. Different radio systems, different training regimes, and different views on fuel reduction continued to cause friction.

The Rise of FFMVic: A New Force, New Challenges

It wasn't until the mid-2010s that the idea of a unified public land firefighting force began to take shape. In 2015, the Victorian Government launched an initiative called "Safer Together." Its goal was ambitious: to improve bushfire risk management across public and private lands by bringing different agencies together in a more coordinated way.

Out of this initiative came Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMVic). But FFMVic was not a new agency in the traditional sense. Instead, it was a brand—an umbrella under which staff from DELWP (now DEECA), Parks Victoria, and other land managers would operate as a single firefighting force on public land.

This branding had its benefits. For the first time, there was a clear identity for the state's public land firefighters. Staff wore the same uniform. They trained together. The public had a better understanding of who was responsible for managing fire in forests and parks. Internally, it helped unify the often-fragmented teams across departments.

But the rise of FFMVic also created tensions. Some CFA volunteers and rural communities saw it as a power shift—an expansion of government control at the expense of local knowledge and community-based firefighting. They feared that the growing influence of FFMVic would marginalise the role of volunteers, who had for decades played a central part in protecting Victoria's countryside.

There were also questions about how well integrated FFMVic really was with the broader emergency services system. While it brought together public land managers, it remained structurally separate from the CFA and the newly formed Fire Rescue Victoria (FRV). Coordination still depended on agreements, protocols, and personal relationships—rather than a single chain of command.

As FFMVic gained prominence, some long-serving fire experts and local brigade leaders began to voice concerns. They warned that the new structure, while well-intentioned, was creating new silos and confusion—particularly when it came to planning, fuel management, and who took the lead when fires crossed land boundaries.

Turning Points That Changed Everything: Black Saturday and the 2020 Reform

Two landmark events over the past 15 years dramatically reshaped Victoria’s fire services. The first was the Black Saturday bushfires in 2009—still the deadliest in the state’s history. The second was the sweeping Fire Services Reform in 2020, which redefined the roles and structure of the state’s firefighting workforce. These turning points exposed the deep flaws in Victoria’s bushfire strategy and set the stage for a new era—one filled with both promise and uncertainty.

Black Saturday (7 February 2009): A Tragedy That Demanded Change

On a scorching Saturday in February 2009, Victoria faced one of the worst firestorms in Australian history. The conditions were catastrophic—soaring temperatures, dry winds, and vast stretches of forest and farmland primed to burn. When the fires hit, they moved with terrifying speed and ferocity. Entire towns were wiped out. One hundred and seventy-three lives were lost. It was a national tragedy.

In the aftermath, a Royal Commission was launched to understand what went wrong—and how it could be prevented from happening again. The findings were damning. Leadership during the event was fragmented. Warnings to the public were delayed or unclear. Fire services lacked coordination. Fuel loads in public forests had been allowed to build up to dangerous levels.

The Commission’s 67 recommendations covered everything from emergency communications to land-use planning. It pushed for bold reforms, including the creation of new leadership roles, stronger coordination between agencies, and a significant increase in fuel reduction burning across the state. It was a roadmap for transformation.

Many of the changes were implemented. A new Fire Services Commissioner role was created in 2010, later evolving into the Emergency Management Commissioner (EMC) position.

Public warning systems were overhauled. More investment was made in firefighting aircraft, equipment, and training. For a time, it felt like Victoria had learned its lesson.

But over the following decade, momentum faded. Political interest shifted. Some reforms were watered down or reversed. Fuel reduction targets became controversial and were ultimately abandoned. While some improvements endured, the deeper structural and cultural issues remained unresolved.

The 2020 Fire Services Reform: A Bold Move With Uncertain Results

A decade after Black Saturday, Victoria underwent one of the most significant overhauls of its fire services in recent memory. Known as the 2020 Fire Services Reform, the change was designed to address long-standing industrial disputes, especially those involving the United Firefighters Union (UFU), the CFA's career firefighters, and government policymakers.

On 1 July 2020, the reform came into effect. All career firefighters from the CFA and the now-defunct Metropolitan Fire Brigade (MFB) were transferred to a new organisation: Fire Rescue Victoria (FRV). The CFA, which had previously operated with both volunteers and career staff, was now an all-volunteer service.

The reform was intended to streamline urban and structural firefighting services. In metro areas and major regional cities, FRV would handle house fires, car accidents, and other emergencies. The CFA would focus on rural fire response and volunteer-led bushfire operations.

But the implications went far beyond the city limits. Many career CFA firefighters who had deep bushfire experience moved to FRV. Some rural areas lost experienced leaders. Volunteer morale, already strained by years of political battles, took another hit. Questions were raised about whether the CFA still had the operational capacity to manage large bushfires—especially without the support of its former career staff.

The reform also added complexity. Now, instead of two major players (CFA and the Department), there were three: CFA, FRV, and FFMVic. Each with different cultures, command structures, and areas of focus. While the intention was to clarify roles, in many ways it further fragmented the system. Agreements had to be rewritten. Relationships had to be rebuilt. Meanwhile, the landscape kept drying, and the fire seasons kept getting worse.

A System Under Strain: Fragmentation, Frustration, and the Fight to Cooperate

Reforming fire services on paper is one thing. Making those changes work on the fireground is something else entirely. As Victoria's emergency management system became more layered and bureaucratic, the simple act of working together became harder. Despite all the policies,

protocols, and plans, real-world coordination has continued to face serious challenges—especially during major bushfires.

Can Structure Help or Hinder?

On paper, Victoria now has one of the most clearly defined emergency management frameworks in the country. Agencies are guided by the State Emergency Management Plan. Joint operational guidelines exist to help CFA and FFMVic work together, particularly when fires cross boundaries between public and private land. When large bushfires break out, multi-agency Incident Management Teams (IMTs) are activated, drawing staff from CFA, FFMVic, and now FRV.

But despite these formal structures, real-world collaboration is often messier. Cultural differences, organisational silos, and unclear lines of authority still get in the way.

Take New South Wales as a comparison. The NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) is the lead combat agency for bushfires across both public and private land. This allows for a unified command structure, streamlined decision-making, and faster initial responses. In contrast, Victoria splits bushfire responsibilities between agencies—CFA on private land, FFMVic on public land. As a result, when fires cross property boundaries, control has to be handed over, or joint command arrangements must be negotiated—sometimes in the heat of the moment.

These transition points can slow things down. Decisions can be delayed. Confusion over who's in charge can lead to gaps in response, or duplicated efforts. During the devastating 2019–20 East Gippsland fires, multiple small lightning strikes were left to smoulder in remote public land areas. Limited early suppression, combined with complex jurisdictional arrangements, meant those fires soon merged into massive blazes that raged for weeks. Local fire experts and advocacy groups have repeatedly warned: when response is fragmented, fires get away.

Volunteer Voices: Overlooked and Underused

One of the most serious side effects of structural reform has been the impact on CFA volunteers. These are the men and women who live in the communities they protect—many of them with decades of experience. Yet, as government-led fire management expanded through FFMVic, some volunteers began to feel sidelined.

Historically, CFA volunteers weren't just fire responders—they were planners, educators, and proactive fuel managers. Some brigades conducted planned burns on private land, helped neighbours prepare properties, and worked hand-in-hand with local government. But after 2009, as fuel management shifted toward risk-based modelling and centralised decision-making, many volunteers found themselves increasingly excluded from key planning conversations.

Efforts like the Safer Together program, which created regional planning committees and community consultation forums, were meant to include all voices. But some CFA members reported that their input felt tokenistic. Local knowledge—of terrain, wind patterns, burn history, and community risk—was often ignored in favour of top-down models and bureaucracy.

Between 2014 and 2018, CFA's operational volunteer numbers dropped by nearly 9%. By 2023, membership had fallen further. While some of that decline is due to broader social trends—like urbanisation and an ageing population—many within the service point to morale issues, lack of respect, and reduced influence as major factors.

The result? A growing gap between those making the decisions and those with the on-the-ground experience to inform them. A fire management system can only work if everyone feels valued, included, and empowered to act.

When Structure Fails: Lessons from Lancefield and Beyond

Sometimes, it takes a single incident to reveal the cracks in a system. In October 2015, one such incident occurred in central Victoria—and it became a powerful example of what can go wrong when agencies work in silos, local knowledge is overlooked, and leadership hesitates at the wrong time.

The Lancefield Escaped Burn: A Cautionary Tale

The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP), now part of FFMVic, was conducting a planned burn near the town of Lancefield. The burn was part of Victoria's fuel reduction program and had been approved through official processes. But conditions on the day turned against them. The fire escaped containment lines and spread quickly, destroying homes and alarming the community.

What followed was more than just fire damage—it was a loss of trust. Local CFA brigades had not been meaningfully involved in the planning or execution of the burn, despite their deep familiarity with the area. Community members weren't properly warned. And when the fire broke out, CFA volunteers were the ones who responded, working tirelessly to protect homes and contain the damage.

An independent investigation found a series of preventable errors. Planning and oversight had been inadequate. Communications were poor. And while the department eventually apologised, the fallout had already begun.

The burn escape triggered a sharp drop in public confidence—not just in DELWP, but in the state's entire fuel management strategy. In response, the government halted the autumn burn

program, reassessed its approach, and adopted a far more risk-averse stance moving forward. The result: fewer burns, fewer hectares treated, and a slow but steady rise in forest fuel levels once again.

Integration or Isolation? The Ongoing Dilemma

Lancefield wasn't just a one-off mistake—it was a symptom of a deeper issue. Despite decades of talking about integration, Victoria's fire services still often operate in isolation. Planned burns on public land are led by FFMVic, with CFA playing a supporting role—if invited. Fuel reduction on private land is left largely to individual landholders, with minimal strategic oversight. Meanwhile, the risk doesn't respect boundaries.

After the 2015 incident, there were renewed calls for better collaboration. Some progress was made. Local agreements were updated, and joint training exercises were expanded in some regions. But the structural divide remains.

Volunteers still need permission to operate on public land. Community members still report delays and confusion during joint fire responses. And in major bushfire events, the seamless coordination promised on paper often becomes much harder to achieve in the field.

As one experienced fireground leader put it, “We’ve built a system that looks good in documents, but it struggles under pressure. Fires don’t wait for handover agreements.”

Complexity Comes at a Cost

By 2025, Victoria's fire response framework includes CFA (volunteers), FRV (career structural firefighters), and FFMVic (public land fire agency)—all coordinated by Emergency Management Victoria. This is far more complicated than the two-agency system of the past. While each has an important role, the more moving parts there are, the more crucial it becomes to have clarity, cooperation, and shared purpose.

The truth is simple: every hour of confusion during a bushfire can cost lives, homes, and entire communities. Complexity without clarity isn't strength—it's risk.

Fire Services Reform 2020: Solving One Problem, Creating Others

The 2020 Fire Services Reform was intended to resolve long-standing internal conflict within Victoria's fire services—mainly around career firefighter representation and union negotiations. On that front, the reform delivered. But in the process, it created new structural gaps, disrupted established relationships, and shook the foundations of Victoria's bushfire response system.

Career Firefighters Move On—and Take Their Experience With Them

Before the reform, the Country Fire Authority (CFA) included both career and volunteer firefighters. This mix worked well in many areas, especially along the urban fringe where career staff provided weekday coverage and volunteers covered nights and weekends. But after years of bitter industrial disputes between the CFA, the United Firefighters Union (UFU), and the Victorian Government, the decision was made to separate the services.

As of July 2020, all career firefighters were moved out of the CFA and into a new body—**Fire Rescue Victoria (FRV)**. The CFA became a volunteer-only organisation. While the reform settled the union disputes, it also triggered the departure of many senior CFA personnel with years—sometimes decades—of bushfire experience.

Many of these individuals had played key leadership roles during large-scale bushfire incidents. They were incident controllers, strike team leaders, and trusted decision-makers. With their transfer to FRV, they were no longer embedded in rural brigades. While FRV can still support bushfire responses when needed, their day-to-day focus is urban firefighting. This shift left a gap in bushfire-season leadership that, in some cases, is still being filled.

At one point during the transition, it was reported that up to 20% of CFA's command positions were vacant—leaving local brigades short on experience just as they were being asked to do more with fewer resources.

Volunteer Morale: Damaged and Drifting

Perhaps the most painful consequence of the 2020 reform wasn't operational—it was emotional. The way the changes were handled left many CFA volunteers feeling betrayed and demoralised. They weren't just losing colleagues—they felt they were losing control of their own organisation.

For years, volunteers had warned that the reform was being pushed through without genuine consultation. The public battle played out in headlines and in Parliament, with resignations from CFA's CEO, Chief Officer, and Board members during the dispute. When the final decision came, many volunteers saw it as a political move that favoured union demands over community-based firefighting.

The impact on morale was immediate. Membership declined. Some volunteers resigned in protest. Others stayed but withdrew from active service. The message they received—intended or not—was that their role in Victoria's fire services was being diminished.

This matters deeply. In bushfire season, volunteer surge capacity is critical. When fires stretch across the state, it's volunteers who fill strike teams, man pumps, build containment lines, and defend homes. When their morale suffers, so does the state's ability to respond.

New Lines, New Relationships

The reform also forced a rethinking of how CFA, FRV, and FFMVic work together. While all three agencies have well-defined areas of responsibility, fires don't always follow those lines. Coordination now depends even more on personal relationships, pre-season planning, and local agreements.

FRV has valuable skills and equipment—especially for structural protection during bushfires. But ensuring they're seamlessly integrated into statewide bushfire planning is an ongoing challenge. CFA and FFMVic also need to reforge relationships, especially at local levels, where some trust was shaken during the transition period.

The goal is still a unified response. But after the reform, getting there has required rebuilding from the ground up.

Boots on the Ground: People, Tools, and the Fight for Capacity

Behind every fire service is a workforce. Trucks, radios, and helicopters might make headlines, but in the end, it's people who manage risk, light planned burns, cut firebreaks, and stand between flames and communities. A good structure means little without enough capable, experienced people to put it into action.

Over the last three decades, both the CFA and public land firefighting agencies have seen major changes in staffing, skills, and resources. Some improvements have been made—but much has also been lost.

A Shrinking Workforce, Fewer Hands in the Field

In the 1980s and 1990s, fire management on public land in Victoria relied heavily on permanent field staff—foresters, machine operators, and general-purpose workers who lived in rural communities. Many had intimate knowledge of the terrain, strong local relationships, and firefighting skills gained through hands-on experience. They were the quiet backbone of the system.

By the 2000s and 2010s, that workforce had changed dramatically. Logging operations in state forests declined. Field staff were reduced through natural attrition, centralisation, and budget cuts. Permanent presence in some areas disappeared. In its place, the Department began relying more on seasonal “Project Firefighters,” typically hired each summer to boost capacity during the fire season.

These seasonal workers—often energetic and committed—play a valuable role. But with fewer year-round field personnel and a greater dependence on short-term staff, the

department lost a layer of experience and local knowledge that was once vital. The ability to respond rapidly in remote areas, build tracks, or conduct complex burns has become more limited in some regions.

Statistics from 2020 showed that DELWP (now DEECA) had around 1,700 accredited fire personnel, including seasonal hires, out of a total workforce of 3,500. But not all of them are firefighters year-round, and not all have deep field experience. The size of the workforce may look similar to the past on paper—but the makeup is very different.

One veteran fire manager put it bluntly: “We used to have men and women with dozers, knowledge of the bush, and the authority to act fast. Now we have fewer people, more consultants, and a lot more paperwork.”

Where Are the Dozers?

Heavy machinery is crucial during campaign fires. Bulldozers build control lines, open access tracks, and help stop fast-moving fires in rugged terrain. In the 1980s, Victoria could call on dozens of machines, often owned and operated by local timber contractors. These operators knew the terrain and could respond quickly.

But as the timber industry has shrunk, so too has the availability of machinery and skilled operators in rural areas. In 1985, more than 70 bulldozers were available for firefighting; by 2003 that number had dropped to just over 60. By the late 2010s and early 2020s, the number was likely even lower. When fires hit now, agencies must contract in machines—often from further afield—and that takes time.

It’s not just about machinery—it’s about having the right people with the right tools, in the right place, at the right time. That ability has eroded in many parts of the state.

Aerial Support: A Clear Win, but Not a Silver Bullet

One area where Victoria has clearly advanced is in **aerial firefighting**. Since the early 2000s, the state has significantly expanded its fleet of water-bombing aircraft, including helicopters, fixed-wing bombers, and even large air tankers during high-risk seasons.

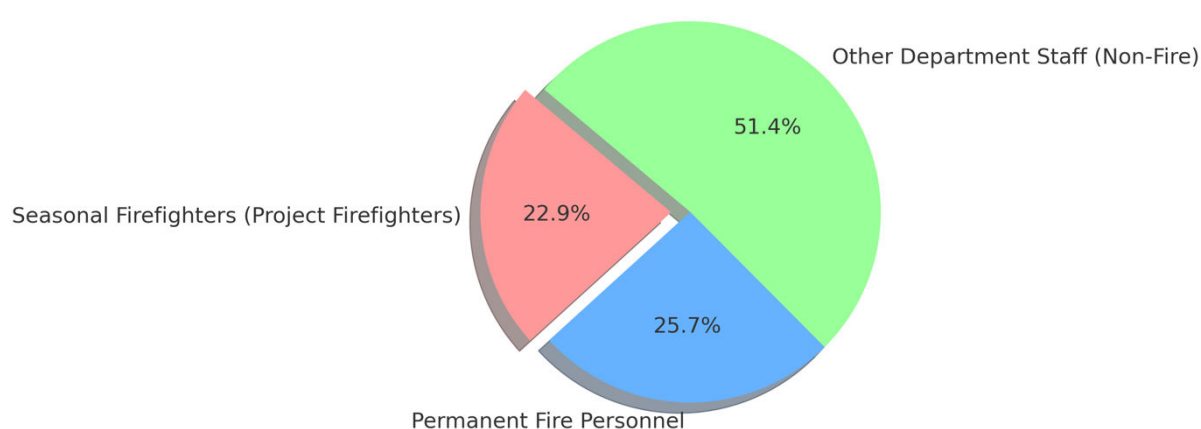
These aircraft play a vital role in the modern firefighting toolkit. They can hit fires early, slow the spread of flames, and buy time for ground crews to contain the blaze. They also provide aerial intelligence and mapping capabilities that support better decision-making.

FFMVic manages aerial operations in partnership with CFA, and Victoria has generally led the nation in this space. During the 2019–20 Black Summer, aircraft played a key role in supporting frontline crews.

But aerial support is exactly that—support. Aircraft can’t contain large fires on their own. They need boots on the ground to finish the job. Without enough skilled personnel to follow up, the benefits of a water drop can be quickly lost. Aircraft can delay disaster, but they rarely stop it.

The risk is that impressive technology becomes a substitute for adequate staffing. Firefighting is still a labour-intensive job, especially when dealing with remote ignitions, complex terrain, or multi-day campaign fires.

Estimated Composition of DELWP/DEECA Workforce (2020)



Bureaucracy vs. Bushfires: Funding, Fuel, and Firefighting in the Field

Behind every decision not to burn, not to cut a track, or not to hire more staff is a budget—and behind every budget is a set of priorities. Over the years, Victoria has invested billions into emergency response systems, aircraft fleets, and public warning platforms. But when it comes to proactive, on-the-ground risk reduction—especially in remote areas—the funding story is far more mixed.

Dollars Spent vs. Results Delivered

Following the 2009 Black Saturday Royal Commission, Victoria committed significant funds to bushfire reform. New trucks, radios, community refuges, upgraded fire stations, and better warning systems all received investment. Fuel reduction efforts were also scaled up—briefly.

The “Safer Together” program, launched in 2015 to improve fuel management planning and coordination, received around \$49 million across its first four years. While substantial on

paper, this funding had to stretch across multiple agencies and objectives: mapping, planning, consultation, training, community engagement, and risk modelling.

Much of the investment went into systems and oversight. Community risk models were refined. Staff attended planning workshops. New software platforms were rolled out. But critics—including frontline workers and fire experts—argue that this came at the expense of boots-on-the-ground activity.

One stakeholder put it plainly:

“There’s something seriously wrong when the overhead costs of fuel reduction vastly exceed the operational costs. It shows we’re planning to burn—but not burning.”

This criticism highlights a growing disconnect. While the strategy may have improved, the action has lagged behind. The process became so risk-averse and documentation-heavy that the original intent—reducing fuel—was often lost in translation.

The Remote Fire Problem: When Distance Equals Danger

One of Victoria’s enduring fire management weaknesses lies in its capacity to respond to **remote ignitions**—fires that start far from roads, towns, or water sources. These fires often begin with lightning strikes in rugged terrain. If not attacked aggressively and early, they can grow into unstoppable campaign fires.

Historically, remote firefighting was handled by departmental staff—people with bush skills, 4WD experience, and the authority to act decisively. Today, much of that experience has been lost. While FFMVic still operates rappel and remote area firefighting teams, their numbers are limited. And when a fire starts in a remote corner of the state, getting personnel there quickly is a challenge.

By contrast, New South Wales has invested in **Remote Area Firefighting Teams (RAFT)** made up of trained volunteers. These teams can be rapidly deployed into difficult terrain to suppress lightning fires before they grow. In Victoria, a similar model has been proposed—but not yet implemented.

Advocates argue that creating volunteer-based remote teams through CFA would significantly boost response capability, particularly in under-resourced regions. It would also give experienced CFA members another avenue to contribute meaningfully to landscape-scale risk reduction.

As it stands, however, when a fire breaks out in remote country, response often depends on a small number of FFMVic crews and the availability of aircraft. If either is delayed or stretched thin, the window to contain the fire closes quickly.

Good Policy Is Not Enough

Victoria's emergency management structure includes some of the most detailed planning frameworks in Australia. Risk-based fuel strategies, predictive modelling, hazard mapping, and integrated fire management zones all sound promising—and they are. But they only work if action follows.

Repeated inquiries have shown that paper plans are not enough. Fire doesn't care about spreadsheets or modelling. It responds to what's on the ground: fuel, wind, terrain—and people with the tools and authority to act.

The truth is uncomfortable: even with the best policy frameworks in place, Victoria remains vulnerable to devastating bushfires because of under-resourced frontline operations, insufficient remote response capability, and a system that often values caution over action.

A System in Need of Reform: What the Evidence Tells Us

Thirty-five years of fire management reforms in Victoria have created a system that is more complex, more centralised, and more risk-aware than ever before. Yet despite these changes, the state continues to face devastating bushfires with increasing frequency and intensity.

The question is no longer whether Victoria has reformed its fire services. It has—many times. The real question is whether those reforms have actually made the system safer, more capable, or more trusted by the communities it serves.

Based on the evidence presented in this report, the answer is: **not consistently, and not enough.**

Key Findings

1. Structural Fragmentation Has Undermined Unity

The creation of new roles, agencies, and command layers may have improved coordination on paper, but in practice, Victoria's system remains divided. CFA, FRV, and FFMVic each operate under separate identities, with different rules, cultures, and chains of command. Fires that cross land tenures still require awkward handovers or joint command, and seamless cooperation is not guaranteed. Compared to systems like NSW's Rural Fire Service, Victoria's multi-agency approach still suffers from complexity and confusion.

2. Leadership Has Been Reactive, Not Proactive

Too often, leadership in Victoria's fire services has been shaped by crisis. Real accountability has usually come only after public outrage or judicial inquiry. While individuals have shown courage and integrity, systemic leadership culture has leaned toward caution, self-protection, and delay. The fear of making a mistake often outweighs the drive to take decisive, proactive action—especially when it comes to planned burning and fuel risk reduction.

3. Fuel Management Has Become Inconsistent and Risk-Averse

Fuel reduction is the single most controllable factor in bushfire risk mitigation. Yet since 1990, Victoria's approach to fuel management has been inconsistent at best, and dangerously inadequate at worst. After a brief period of high achievement following the 2009 Royal Commission, the state retreated from its hectare-based target and adopted a more flexible "residual risk" model. While the model is scientifically sound, its implementation has been weak—prescribed burning levels have dropped sharply, and residual risk has risen above safe thresholds in key regions.

4. Volunteer Capacity Is Declining

Victoria's volunteers remain the heart of rural fire response. Yet volunteer numbers are falling, experience is being lost, and morale has been damaged—particularly in the wake of the 2020 Fire Services Reform. Volunteers report feeling excluded from planning processes, disrespected by political leaders, and increasingly unsure of their place in a system dominated by government agencies. This erosion of community-based capability is a serious threat to surge capacity during major fires.

5. Remote Area Fire Suppression Is a Persistent Weakness

The ability to respond rapidly to lightning strikes and remote ignitions is essential for modern bushfire management. Victoria has limited capacity in this area, relying on a small number of departmental crews and aerial support. The absence of a dedicated volunteer-based remote firefighting team, such as those operating in NSW, leaves the state exposed to fires that could have been contained early but are allowed to grow into large, uncontrollable events.

6. Community Trust Is Fractured

After decades of promises, reforms, and inquiries, many communities in high-risk areas feel let down. They are told that bushfire safety is a shared responsibility, yet see government agencies hesitant to take bold action—whether that's clearing fuel, conducting burns, or involving local knowledge in planning. When fire hits, and those communities feel under-supported or ignored, that trust breaks down further.

Recommendations for a Safer Victoria: Rebuilding Capacity, Unity, and Trust

This report has shown that Victoria's bushfire management system, despite decades of reform, still contains critical weaknesses. These are not abstract policy flaws—they are real-world vulnerabilities that increase the risk to lives, homes, and landscapes every summer.

To break the cycle of disaster followed by inquiry, followed by partial reform, Victoria must act decisively. What follows is a set of bold but realistic recommendations that, if implemented, would significantly improve the state's fire preparedness and response.

1. Rebuild Unity Across the Fire Services

Recommendation: Progressively move toward a more integrated fire service model—potentially a unified rural fire service similar to the NSW RFS.

Rationale: CFA, FRV, and FFMVic each play important roles, but the current structure creates duplication, gaps in coordination, and confusion during multi-agency events. While full structural merger may not be politically feasible in the short term, practical steps can be taken now—such as joint planning hubs, integrated training programs, and interoperable systems—to lay the groundwork for future unification.

Short-Term Action:

- Co-locate CFA and FFMVic personnel in regional planning teams
- Standardise equipment, communications, and terminology across agencies
- Expand multi-agency Incident Management Team (IMT) pre-season exercises

2. Restore Confidence and Morale in CFA Volunteers

Recommendation: Reinvest in CFA volunteers through increased support, meaningful engagement, and a public reaffirmation of their value.

Rationale: Volunteers are irreplaceable, especially in rural areas. Their knowledge, presence, and response capacity cannot be replicated by full-time services alone. Many have felt alienated or disrespected by recent reforms. A cultural and leadership reset is needed.

Short-Term Action:

- Establish formal volunteer advisory panels at regional and state levels
- Reintroduce CFA as a planning authority on land-use decisions in bushfire-prone areas
- Create new training and leadership pathways for young volunteers

3. Revive and Strengthen the Fuel Management Program

Recommendation: Reintroduce firm, public targets for fuel reduction—based on both area treated and risk reduction outcomes.

Rationale: The shift to a “residual risk” model was meant to be smarter, not softer. Yet burning levels have dropped dramatically, and the state is now falling short of both hectares treated and risk targets. Planned burning, mechanical fuel treatment, and cultural burning must be scaled up.

Short-Term Action:

- Publish a detailed annual fuel management performance report
- Fund local “burn teams” capable of working across tenures
- Incentivise private landholders to reduce fuel through grants or rebates

4. Build Remote Area Firefighting Capability

Recommendation: Establish a dedicated volunteer-based Remote Area Firefighting Team (RAFT) under the CFA, trained and ready to respond to remote lightning ignitions.

Rationale: Many large fires begin in remote, rugged country. The faster they’re attacked, the greater the chance of containment. Relying on limited FFMVic resources is no longer enough. Other states have successfully deployed volunteer-based remote crews—Victoria should do the same.

Short-Term Action:

- Pilot a RAFT program in one high-risk region using CFA volunteers
- Provide specialist gear, insurance, and support for remote deployments
- Partner with Parks Victoria and FFMVic for joint training

5. Streamline Bureaucracy and Focus on Outcomes

Recommendation: Shift the focus from excessive planning and process to practical, measurable results on the ground.

Rationale: The current fuel management approval process is overly complex, risk-averse, and discouraging of bold action. Agency staff need to be empowered—not paralysed—by the system they work in.

Short-Term Action:

- Simplify burn approval workflows and environmental compliance processes
- Introduce “decision support” rather than “decision delay” protocols for fire managers
- Recognise and reward on-ground risk reduction achievements in performance reviews

6. Rebuild Public Trust Through Transparency and Inclusion

Recommendation: Genuinely involve local communities in bushfire planning, preparedness, and fuel management.

Rationale: Many residents in fire-prone areas feel disconnected from the decision-making processes that affect their safety. They want to contribute, but often encounter bureaucracy, delays, or a lack of information.

Short-Term Action:

- Expand Community-Based Bushfire Management (CBBM) projects to more towns
- Hold pre-season briefings with real data on local fuel loads and risk
- Include traditional owner groups in all regional fire planning processes

Conclusion: The Time to Act Is Now

Victoria's relationship with fire is long, complex, and often painful. From Black Friday in 1939 to Black Saturday in 2009, and the Black Summer of 2019–20, the state has been shaped by fire in both its physical landscape and its institutional memory. After each disaster, the question is asked: what went wrong—and what must change?

This report has sought to answer that question not with blame, but with clarity. It has shown that despite decades of inquiries, restructures, and investment, the fundamental weaknesses in Victoria's fire management system persist. Fragmentation between agencies. Inconsistent leadership. Underinvestment in prevention. Erosion of volunteer capability. Rising fuel loads. Slipping community trust.

We have not ignored the gains. Victoria has made valuable progress in some areas—particularly in aerial firefighting, public warnings, and strategic risk modelling. But a system built on process without performance will not withstand the bushfires of the future. The risk is growing. The climate is changing. And time is running out.

What's needed now is not another review, another restructure, or another glossy strategy. What's needed is action. Real, tangible action—on the ground, in communities, across agencies, and in government.

The recommendations in this report are not radical. They are grounded in common sense, drawn from experience, and informed by the lived reality of those who have fought fires, led response efforts, lost homes, or stood shoulder-to-shoulder with their neighbours under a black sky.

They are achievable. They are urgent. And they matter.

Because the next fire season is already coming. Because the next lightning strike will land somewhere. And because the next community to face the flames deserves a system that is unified, capable, and ready—not one that is still debating its own design.

This report is called *FFMVic Under Fire*—but it's not just about one agency. It's about an entire state grappling with the weight of its history, the challenges of its present, and the responsibility it holds for its future.

We owe it to every person who has suffered loss, and to every firefighter who has stood in harm's way, to finally get this right.

The time for excuses is over. The time to act is now.

Glossary of Terms

AIIMS (Australasian Inter-Service Incident Management System):

A nationally adopted system that provides a common framework for managing emergency incidents in Australia. Used by fire and emergency services to coordinate responses efficiently.

Black Saturday (2009):

One of Australia's worst natural disasters. On 7 February 2009, bushfires across Victoria resulted in 173 fatalities, thousands of homes lost, and widespread devastation. Led to a major Royal Commission and subsequent reforms.

CFA (Country Fire Authority):

A volunteer-based fire and emergency services organisation in Victoria responsible for fire suppression, prevention, and response across rural and regional areas. Became a volunteer-only service after the 2020 reform.

DELWP (Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning):

Now part of DEECA, this was the government department responsible for land and fire management in Victoria, including prescribed burning on public land.

DEECA (Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action):

The current Victorian government department responsible for fire management on public land, energy regulation, climate action, and environmental conservation.

Emergency Management Commissioner (EMC):

Victoria's senior emergency management official, responsible for the coordination of response to major emergencies, including bushfires, across all agencies.

Fire Rescue Victoria (FRV):

A career firefighting service created in 2020, responsible for structural fires and emergency response in metropolitan and some regional areas. Absorbed career firefighters from the former MFB and CFA.

FFMVic (Forest Fire Management Victoria):

A fire management division within DEECA and partner agencies (like Parks Victoria), responsible for bushfire prevention and response on public land.

IMT (Incident Management Team):

A group of trained personnel responsible for managing an emergency response at a local or regional level. Often includes members from CFA, FFMVic, and FRV during bushfires.

Planned Burning (Prescribed Burning):

The intentional, controlled application of fire under specific conditions to reduce fuel loads and mitigate the risk of more intense, uncontrolled bushfires.

Residual Risk:

A risk-based measure used to estimate the remaining bushfire risk to people and property after planned fuel reduction activities have been carried out.

Safer Together:

A Victorian government initiative launched in 2015 to improve bushfire risk management across both public and private land through collaborative planning and better risk-based strategies.

Royal Commission:

A high-level public inquiry led by independent commissioners with legal powers. Used in Australia to investigate serious issues, such as major bushfire disasters.

References

1. 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission Final Report (2010)

Issued by: Victorian Government

A comprehensive inquiry into the causes, responses, and aftermath of the Black Saturday bushfires. Contains 67 recommendations covering fire warnings, fuel management, emergency coordination, and structural reform.

2. Inspector-General for Emergency Management (IGEM) Annual Reports (2015–2023)

Issued by: IGEM Victoria

Regular reviews of Victoria's emergency management sector, including progress on bushfire preparedness, lessons learned from recent fire events, and agency performance tracking.

3. Emergency Management Victoria – Strategic Action Plan 2015–2020 and Beyond

Issued by: Emergency Management Victoria (EMV)

Outlines strategic goals for collaboration, capability building, and community resilience across the emergency services sector.

4. CFA Annual Reports (1990–2023)

Issued by: Country Fire Authority

Annual operational and financial reports containing statistics on volunteer numbers, fire activity, training, and resource allocation.

5. Fire Services Reform Implementation Monitor Reports (2018–2021)

Issued by: Fire Services Implementation Monitor (FSIM)

Independent oversight of Victoria's 2020 Fire Services Reform, including progress on agency transitions, operational integration, and stakeholder engagement.

6. Forest Fire Management Victoria – Safer Together Program Documentation (2015–2022)

Issued by: DELWP and later DEECA

Includes policy briefings, progress reports, and risk-based bushfire planning frameworks under the "Safer Together" initiative to promote integrated land and fire management.

7. NSW Rural Fire Service – Remote Area Firefighting Team (RAFT) Program Overview

Issued by: NSW RFS

Describes the model and operational benefits of deploying trained volunteer crews into remote terrain to quickly suppress small fires before they escalate.

8. DELWP Fuel Management Annual Reports (2010–2019)

Issued by: Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning

Reports on hectares treated, residual risk targets, outcomes, and environmental impacts of the state's planned burning program.

9. East Gippsland Fires – Post-Incident Review and Case Studies (2020)

Issued by: IGEM and Emergency Management Victoria

Reviews the operational response to the 2019–20 East Gippsland fires, with analysis of ignition management, multi-agency coordination, and delays in suppression.

10. Lancefield Fire Independent Investigation Report (2015)

Issued by: Emergency Management Victoria

A formal investigation into the escaped planned burn at Lancefield. Details errors in planning, ignition, weather forecasting, and communications, as well as community impact.

11. Parliamentary Inquiry into Fire Services Reform (2016–2019)

Issued by: Parliament of Victoria – Environment, Natural Resources and Regional Development Committee

Hearings and reports detailing stakeholder views on fire services structure, union involvement, CFA volunteer capacity, and reform pathways.

12. Victorian Auditor-General's Office – Managing Victoria's Public Land Reports (2012 and 2021)

Issued by: VAGO

Assesses the effectiveness and efficiency of land and fire management, including workforce capability, asset maintenance, and environmental risk.

13. Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria (VFBV) Submissions and Position Papers (2015–2023)

Issued by: VFBV

Advocacy documents representing the views and concerns of CFA volunteers, particularly regarding reform, operational autonomy, and inclusion in fire planning.

14. Media Reports and Analysis (2009–2023)

Sources include:

- *ABC News* – Investigative reporting on fire events and agency accountability
- *The Age* – Coverage of political developments and fire service reform
- *Herald Sun* – Volunteer and union perspectives, public reaction, fire response timelines

15. Climate Council of Australia – Fire and Climate Change Reports

Issued by: The Climate Council

Scientific briefings on how climate change is influencing the length, severity, and unpredictability of Australia's bushfire seasons.

16. Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience (AIDR) – Knowledge Hub & Reports

Provides nationally recognised bushfire data, incident reviews, and best practice guidelines across all jurisdictions.

About the Collaboration

This book was created through a unique and forward-thinking collaboration between the author and an advanced artificial intelligence writing assistant developed by OpenAI. Together, they blended lived experience, professional insight, and modern research capabilities to produce a report that is both deeply informed and highly accessible.

The author, a seasoned expert with decades of firsthand knowledge in fire services and emergency management, brought to the table invaluable real-world experience and a clear understanding of the challenges faced by Victoria's fire sector. This foundation of lived leadership, service, and advocacy provided the heart and soul of the work.

The AI assistant contributed as a dynamic writing partner—supporting with research synthesis, structural clarity, fact-checking, editing, and a reader-friendly narrative style. It

helped transform complex information into digestible chapters, drew from a vast knowledge base of public inquiries and policy frameworks, and ensured consistency in tone and formatting throughout the book.

This partnership represents the future of accessible, informed, and timely publishing. It demonstrates how technology can empower subject-matter experts to share their insights faster, with greater polish, and to a wider audience—without compromising authenticity or credibility.

The result is a publication that retains the voice of the author, the integrity of lived experience, and the strength of evidence-based writing—delivered in a style that invites engagement from the public, policymakers, and professionals alike.

This is not just a book about reform. It is an example of it.

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