

**2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission**

Letters Patent issued 16 February 2009

**REDESDALE AND BENDIGO FIRES  
SUBMISSIONS OF COUNSEL ASSISTING**

**Contents**

REDESDALE FIRE .....	2
1 OVERVIEW .....	2
2 CAUSE.....	3
3 WEATHER .....	5
4 DETECTION .....	8
5 INCIDENT MANAGEMENT .....	9
6 RESPONSE .....	14
7 EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT.....	17
8 WARNINGS.....	19
9 ROADBLOCKS .....	22
10 COMMUNICATIONS.....	23
11 PROPOSED KEY FINDINGS.....	25
BENDIGO FIRE .....	27
12 OVERVIEW .....	27
13 CAUSE .....	29
14 WEATHER .....	29
15 DETECTION .....	31
16 INCIDENT MANAGEMENT .....	32
17 RESPONSE .....	38
18 EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT .....	42
19 WARNINGS.....	45
20 EVACUATION .....	50
21 ROADBLOCKS.....	52
22 COMMUNICATIONS .....	53
23 PROPOSED KEY FINDINGS.....	54

## REDESDALE FIRE

### 1 OVERVIEW

- 1.1 At 15:11 on 7 February 2009 a fire near Coliban Park Road, Redesdale, was reported to the CFA. The fire started in a creek bed on open farmland between the eastern bank of the Coliban River and the northern end of Summerhill Road, about two kilometres to the west of Redesdale. The township of Redesdale is on the road between Kyneton to the south and Heathcote to the northeast, to the south of Lake Eppalock. It is 95 kilometres north-west of Melbourne and 35 kilometres south-east of Bendigo.<sup>1</sup>
- 1.2 The fire burned for about 19 kilometres in a south-easterly direction from the point of origin. After the south-westerly wind change at 18:35, the fire then burned to the north-east and in some areas to the north. The total area burned by the fire was about 10,000 hectares, and was 19.9 kilometres long and 8 kilometres wide at its widest point.<sup>2</sup> It burned in four municipalities: starting in Greater Bendigo, moving through Mount Alexander, into Macedon Ranges and Mitchell.<sup>3</sup>
- 1.3 The landscape through which the Redesdale fire burned is hilly country on the northern side of the Great Dividing Range. The Coliban River, the Campaspe River and naturally created drainage channels run through the area, and have created a number of valleys and ravines along their paths. A prominent feature of the fire area is a number of large granite outcrops. These combine with the area's valleys and ravines to make vehicle access off established tracks extremely difficult. The vegetation ranges from open grassland to areas of scattered trees and bush, and includes some private blue gum plantations.<sup>4</sup>
- 1.4 The behaviour and direction of the fire was erratic at times, due to the strong winds continually shifting from north to north west and local winds through the valleys and ravines differing from the prevailing wind. The fire was fast running in grassland, even where there was very little fuel. It was observed to be a 'blanket of fire' spreading across the landscape, with a flame front 20 metres deep and a flame height of one to two metres. The fire developed into a crown fire in some forested areas, including in the Mount Lofty reserve.<sup>5</sup>
- 1.5 The average rate of spread of the fire was 6 kilometres per hour. During the course of the afternoon the fire spread rapidly though grassland, at a rate of up to 12 kilometres per hour. Its rate of spread was slower in areas of heavy fuels and

<sup>1</sup> Deering T9958:11–T9958:16; Exhibit 462 – Statement of Flett (VPO.001.027.0169) at 0171

<sup>2</sup> Deering T9959:1–T9959:6

<sup>3</sup> Deering T9962:17–T9962:20

<sup>4</sup> Deering T9958:17–T9958:30; Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Redesdale Fire on 7 February 2009 (BOM.901.0213) at 0221 and Figure 2

<sup>5</sup> Deering T9959:13–T9959:29

forest, as low as 1 kilometre per hour.<sup>6</sup>

- 1.6 At 15:20, nine minutes after the initial report of the fire, it crossed the Metcalfe-Redesdale Road.<sup>7</sup> The fire crossed the Kyneton-Redesdale Road, just over six kilometres from the point of origin, in several places between 15:42 and 16:00, and reached the community of Barfold.<sup>8</sup> At around 16:49 it crossed Watchbox Road.<sup>9</sup> By 18:00 the fire had reached the locality of Sidonia, where it burned a number of private blue gum plantations.<sup>10</sup>
- 1.7 Between 18:35 and 18:46 the south westerly wind change moved through the fire ground.<sup>11</sup> The wind change pushed the eastern flank of the fire to the north east, towards the communities of Redesdale, Mia Mia and Glenhope. The concerted effort made by firefighters during the afternoon to secure the northeastern flank of the fire was effective, and the fire did not reach these localities.<sup>12</sup>
- 1.8 Once the wind change had passed the weather conditions abated, and firefighters were able to directly attack the fire on all flanks.<sup>13</sup> The fire was controlled by 07:00 on 8 February 2009, although there were some breakouts in the following days due to strong southerly winds.<sup>14</sup> It was completely blacked out by 14 February 2009.<sup>15</sup>
- 1.9 There were 12 houses damaged or destroyed by the Redesdale fire, out of more than 100 houses in the fire area. Other structures lost in the fire included more than 50 sheds and outbuildings, the Baynton church and a bridge. Two olive oil plantations, a vineyard and two blue gum plantations were also burned, to differing extents. Two CFA forward control vehicles were damaged in the course of the fire fight on 7 February 2009. There was no loss of life.<sup>16</sup>

## 2 CAUSE

- 2.1 The cause of ignition of the Redesdale fire has been investigated but not determined.
- 2.2 On Monday, 9 February 2009 Mervyn Flett, a fire investigator employed by DSE, went to the area where the fire was thought to have started. By tracking several runs of the fire back towards its source, he determined that the area of origin was

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<sup>6</sup> Deering T9959:8–T9959:12

<sup>7</sup> Deering T9960:6–T9960:10

<sup>8</sup> Deering T9960:23–T9960:31

<sup>9</sup> Deering T9962:15–T9962:16

<sup>10</sup> Deering T9963:10–T9963:12

<sup>11</sup> Deering T9963:13–T9963:18

<sup>12</sup> Deering T9961:3–T9961:26

<sup>13</sup> Deering T9963:15–T9963:17

<sup>14</sup> Deering T9963:23–T9963:27

<sup>15</sup> Deering T9958:8–T9958:10

<sup>16</sup> Deering T9957:21–T9957:27; T9963:28–T9964:12

on a farming property called 'Summer Hill', about 500 metres between the northern end of Summerhill Road and the eastern bank of the Coliban River. Mr Flett continued his investigations over the following week, examining the area of origin more closely, taking photographs, speaking with residents in the area and obtaining lightning strike records. While he was able to narrow down the area of origin, he was not able to identify the precise point of origin of the fire.<sup>17</sup>

- 2.3 On Thursday, 19 February 2009 John Kelleher, a scientist with Victoria Police Forensic Services, and Justyn Brennan, a forensic officer, examined the area identified by Mr Flett as the probable area of origin. Mr Kelleher described the area as follows:<sup>18</sup>

*'Summer Hill' station is 5-6 kilometres west-southwest of Redesdale township. The road into and through the property, Summerhill Road, leaves the north side of the Redesdale-Metcalf Road. Summerhill Road leads essentially north, with the driveway to the farmhouse west after 200 metres. About four kilometres north of the road was an area identified by Senior Forester Merv Flett of the Department of Sustainability and Environment as the probable area of origin of the fire.*

*The part of the property indicated by Mr Flett was in a creek bed between the north end of Summerhill Road and the Coliban River. The creek ran approximately east from the river, and in the area concerned, looped around several quite large rock shelves. There was a small flat area on the northern side of the creek, and trees on both sides. The ground rose quite steeply on both sides of the creek, more so on the northern side and further west towards the Coliban River. To the southeast, the country was rising but generally open, and to the east about 500 metres distant was a belt of eucalypt forest and scrub about one kilometre deep followed by more open country.*

Mr Kelleher considered that the pattern of burning was consistent with a fire starting in the area identified by Mr Flett, and did not attempt to determine an exact point of origin.<sup>19</sup> Mr Brennan took a number of photographs of the area of origin and other parts of 'Summer Hill' affected by the fire.<sup>20</sup>

- 2.4 Neither Mr Flett nor Mr Kelleher found any obvious sources of accidental ignition. There were no houses or sheds within hundreds of metres of the area of origin.<sup>21</sup> There was no sign of machinery having been used in the area or of the recent campfires or other open fires.<sup>22</sup> No lightning strikes were detected by the Bureau of Meteorology (BOM) in the area on 7 February 2009 and the creek bed was well below the level of the country on either side, making a lightning strike unlikely.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Exhibit 462 – Statement of Flett (VPO.001.027.0169) at 0170

<sup>18</sup> Exhibit 482 – Statement of Kelleher (VPO.001.027.0175) at 0175–0176

<sup>19</sup> Exhibit 462 – Statement of Kelleher (VPO.001.027.0175) at 0177

<sup>20</sup> Exhibit 462 – Statement of Brennan (SUMM.044.002.1615); Attached photographs (VPO.001.033.0010 – VPO.001.033.0127)

<sup>21</sup> Exhibit 462 – Statement of Kelleher (VPO.001.027.0175) at 0177

<sup>22</sup> Exhibit 462 – Wildfire Investigation – Detailed Report (VPO.001.038.0293) at 0299; Statement of Kelleher (VPO.001.027.0175) at 0177

<sup>23</sup> Exhibit 462 – Statement of Flett (VPO.001.027.0169) at 0172; Wildfire Investigation – Detailed Report (VPO.001.038.0293) at 0299; Statement of Kelleher (VPO.001.027.0175) at 0177

The area is two kilometres from electricity poles or lines.<sup>24</sup>

2.5 There are a number of possible sources of ignition that were not excluded by the investigators. Mr Kelleher looked closely at nearby electric fences, but found no indication of a fault or problem with them.<sup>25</sup> There were several other possibilities that remained:<sup>26</sup>

- *given that there was a track into the area suitable for motorcycles or four-wheel drive vehicles, the possibility of ignition by a spark or hot exhaust system was present;*
- *deliberate ignition could not be excluded; however, this would require access through several kilometres of private property, which seems less likely;*
- *ignition by farm operations, such as burning off or cutting firewood; in all the circumstances, this seems least likely, (and there was no evidence to support such a source, except that firstly, evidence may have burnt, and secondly, there had been a considerable delay in attending this scene, allowing the possibility that evidence had been removed).*
- *ignition by a carelessly discarded cigarette butt; while again, this would require access through several kilometres of private property, this is difficult to exclude completely. Also, farm employees may be expected to visit the area, and may or may not smoke. Farm workers would be conscious of the fire danger, and there is a relatively low probability of ignition by careless workers.*

While these possible causes could not be excluded, no evidence has been identified to support a conclusion that any of these sources ignited the fire.

### 3 WEATHER

3.1 The BOM forecast for the North Central District for Saturday 7 February 2009, issued at 16:15 on Friday 6 February 2009, was for north to northeasterly winds tending northwesterly up to 55 km/h during the morning, ahead of a cooler southwest change during the late evening. Daytime temperatures were forecast to reach the lower 40s. The forecast included fire weather and severe weather warnings, and advised that the CFA had declared a day of Total Fire Ban for all districts.<sup>27</sup> The forecast issued at about the same time for Bendigo for 7 February 2009 was:<sup>28</sup>

*A sunny day. Raised dust during the evening. Winds north to northeasterly averaging up to 35 km/h tending cooler west to southwesterly 40 to 50 km/h by early evening.*

*Precis:      Windy and dust                              Min    25            Max    44*

<sup>24</sup> Exhibit 462 – Wildfire Investigation – Detailed Report (VPO.001.038.0293) at 0299

<sup>25</sup> Exhibit 462 – Statement of Kelleher (VPO.001.027.0175) at 0177

<sup>26</sup> Exhibit 462 – Statement of Kelleher (VPO.001.027.0175) at 0177–0178

<sup>27</sup> Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Redesdale Fire on 7 February 2009 (BOM.901.0213) at 0237

<sup>28</sup> Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Redesdale Fire on 7 February 2009 (BOM.901.0213) at 0242

- 3.2 The BOM issued updated forecasts early on 7 February 2009, at 05:48 for the North Central District, and at 05:41 for Bendigo. The forecast for the rest of the day for the North Central District was:<sup>29</sup>

*Dry. North to northwesterly wind increasing to average 40 to 60 km/h this morning, stronger about elevated areas. A milder, strong and squally southwest change this evening. Areas of raised dust. Temperatures in the lower 40s during the day.*

The forecast for Bendigo for the rest of Saturday was for a windy day with a late cooler change and a maximum temperature of 44°C.<sup>30</sup> Both forecasts repeated the fire weather warning, and the advice of a Total Fire Ban, with the maximum fire danger forecast to be extreme.<sup>31</sup>

- 3.3 Fire Weather Forecasts for Victoria were issued at 16:45 on 6 February 2009, and at 06:30 on 7 February 2009. For Bendigo Airport, both forecasts were for a maximum forest fire danger index of 142 and a grass fire danger index of 186, with a maximum temperature of 44°C, relative humidity of 6%, and north to northwesterly winds of up to 50 km/h. A southwesterly wind change of up to 50 km/h was forecast for between 17:00 and 21:00.<sup>32</sup>
- 3.4 The actual weather conditions for the area of the Redesdale fire on 7 February 2009 can be estimated based on a range of information collected by the BOM, including data recorded by Automatic Weather Stations (AWSs) at Redesdale, at Bendigo Airport to the north west and at Kilmore Gap to the south east.<sup>33</sup>
- 3.5 By 09:00 on Saturday 7 February 2009 temperatures in the Redesdale fire area were about 30°C.<sup>34</sup> The temperature at Redesdale at 09:00 was exactly 30°C.<sup>35</sup> The wind was from the north northeast at 10 km/h and the relative humidity was about 30%.<sup>36</sup> By 10:00 the wind speed had increased to around 30 km/h.<sup>37</sup>
- 3.6 By noon, winds had shifted to northerly and had increased to 35 km/h, the temperature was in the low 40s and relative humidity had dropped to around 10%. The Redesdale AWS observations at noon were of a northerly wind at 35 km/h, a temperature of 41.2°C, and relative humidity of 9%.<sup>38</sup>
- 3.7 The wind fluctuated between north and northwest between noon and 15:00 and

<sup>29</sup> Exhibit 557 –Meteorological Aspects of the Redesdale Fire on 7 February 2009 (BOM.901.0213) at 0239

<sup>30</sup> Exhibit 557 –Meteorological Aspects of the Redesdale Fire on 7 February 2009(BOM.901.0213) at 0243

<sup>31</sup> Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Redesdale Fire on 7 February 2009 (BOM.901.0213) at 0238–0239, 0243

<sup>32</sup> Exhibit 22 – Statement of Williams, Annexure 1 (WIT.013.001.0012) at 0194–0195, 0210–0211

<sup>33</sup> Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Redesdale Fire on 7 February 2009 (BOM.901.0213) at 0216–0217 and Figure 1

<sup>34</sup> Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Redesdale Fire on 7 February 2009 (BOM.901.0213) at 0222

<sup>35</sup> Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Redesdale Fire on 7 February 2009 (BOM.901.0213) at 0227

<sup>36</sup> Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Redesdale Fire on 7 February 2009(BOM.901.0213) at 0222, 0227

<sup>37</sup> Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Redesdale Fire on 7 February 2009 (BOM.901.0213) at 0223

<sup>38</sup> Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Redesdale Fire on 7 February 2009 (BOM.901.0213) at 0227

increased further to 45 to 50 km/h.<sup>39</sup> At 15:00, shortly before the fire started, the temperature at Redesdale was 44°C and relative humidity was 7%.<sup>40</sup> The hot, windy and extremely dry conditions remained at these levels until the wind changed to the southwest in the early evening.<sup>41</sup>

- 3.8 A spot fire weather forecast for the Redesdale fire ground was requested by the Epsom ICC at 16:00 and issued by the BOM at 16:23. The weather overview in the forecast was:<sup>42</sup>

*Strong and squally northwest wind will shift west to southwesterly between 8 and 9 pm this evening. Particularly high wind squalls are likely in the vicinity of the change. Wind will tend more southwesterly during the evening and overnight and moderate. There is a change of high based thunderstorms (which will probably have little or no rain) near the change and following it.*

- 3.9 A further spot fire weather forecast was requested at 17:00 and was issued at 17:32. The weather overview, particularly in relation to the timing of the wind change, was markedly different from the forecast issued only an hour earlier:<sup>43</sup>

*The wind change is now expected to move through 1 to 2 hours earlier than anticipated. Since the change has already gone through Ballarat look for the change to go through between 1830 and 1900. Gusty west/southwest winds will be found behind the change with lowering temperatures and rising humidity.*

- 3.10 The leading edge of the wind change passed through Kilmore Gap at 18:10, Redesdale at 18:35 and Bendigo Airport at 18:45.<sup>44</sup> The BOM estimates that the change moved through Barfold, on the southwest flank of the fire ground, 10 to 15 minutes before passing through Redesdale.<sup>45</sup>

- 3.11 In the first 25 minutes after the wind change, the temperature at Redesdale dropped from 41.1°C to 33.9°C and relative humidity rose from 12% to 26%.<sup>46</sup> Winds following the change were southwesterly at 45 to 50 km/h for about 30 minutes, easing to 25 km/h by 21:00.<sup>47</sup> At that time the temperature at Redesdale had fallen to 31.4°C and relative humidity had risen to 29%.<sup>48</sup> The weather conditions continued to moderate overnight, and by 05:00 on 8 February 2009 the temperature at Redesdale was 21.1°C and relative humidity was 65%.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Redesdale Fire on 7 February 2009 (BOM.901.0213) at 0223

<sup>40</sup> Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Redesdale Fire on 7 February 2009 (BOM.901.0213) at 0227

<sup>41</sup> Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Redesdale Fire on 7 February 2009 (BOM.901.0213) at 0224, 0227

<sup>42</sup> Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Redesdale Fire on 7 February 2009 (BOM.901.0213) at 0246

<sup>43</sup> Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Redesdale Fire on 7 February 2009 (BOM.901.0213) at 0247

<sup>44</sup> Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Redesdale Fire on 7 February 2009 (BOM.901.0213) at 0224

<sup>45</sup> Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Redesdale Fire on 7 February 2009 (BOM.901.0213) at 0224

<sup>46</sup> Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Redesdale Fire on 7 February 2009 (BOM.901.0213) at 0227

<sup>47</sup> Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Redesdale Fire on 7 February 2009 (BOM.901.0213) at 0224

<sup>48</sup> Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Redesdale Fire on 7 February 2009 (BOM.901.0213) at 0227

<sup>49</sup> Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Redesdale Fire on 7 February 2009 (BOM.901.0213) at 0225–0226

- 3.12 No lightning strikes were recorded over the fire ground, although these were possible during periods on the evening of 7 February 2009 and in the early hours of 8 February 2009.<sup>50</sup> While no rainfall was recorded near the fire ground in the 24 hours to 05:00 on 8 February 2009, some very light falls may have occurred at around the time of the wind change.<sup>51</sup>

## 4 DETECTION

- 4.1 The Redesdale fire was reported to VicFire by a local person who called 000 at 15:11.<sup>52</sup> The fire was reported to be at Coliban Park Road, Redesdale, on the western side of the Coliban River.<sup>53</sup> As the fire investigators subsequently discovered, the fire in fact started on the eastern side of the river.<sup>54</sup>
- 4.2 VicFire immediately paged the Redesdale, Metcalfe, Sutton Grange, Langley-Barfold and Myrtle Creek brigades to respond to the fire. The page was received at 15:12 by Lindsay Booker, Second Lieutenant of the Redesdale Brigade and a Deputy Group Officer of the Metcalfe Group.<sup>55</sup>
- 4.3 Samantha Siddle lives at Racecourse Road, Redesdale, very close to the fire's point of origin. She first smelled smoke at around 15:00, and within about 15 minutes her paddocks were on fire. She called 000 at 15:20 to report the fire at her property.<sup>56</sup> The Redesdale, Elphinstone and Mia Mia brigades were paged to respond to this call, and Mr Booker received that page at 15:25.<sup>57</sup>
- 4.4 The fire was also seen soon after it started by DSE fire tower observers in the Mount Ida and Fryers Ridge fire towers.<sup>58</sup> It was from the Fryers Ridge tower that Peter Wilson, the Group Officer of the Metcalfe Group who was responsible for co-ordinating the initial response, learned of the fire.<sup>59</sup> However, visibility from the fire towers was poor because of raised dust in the air.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Redesdale Fire on 7 February 2009 (BOM.901.0213) at 0222

<sup>51</sup> Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Redesdale Fire on 7 February 2009 (BOM.901.0213) at 0226

<sup>52</sup> Exhibit 466 – Statement of Vearing (WIT.3024.004.0215) [28]; Exhibit 2 – IMS data (WIT.004.002.1459) at 1512

<sup>53</sup> Exhibit 2 – IMS data (WIT.004.002.1459) at 1512; Brittain T9971:31–T9972:4; Exhibit 441 – Map of Redesdale (TEN.119.001.0002)

<sup>54</sup> See paragraphs 2.2–2.3 above

<sup>55</sup> Exhibit 462 – Statement of Booker (SUMM.044.002.0277) at 0277; Exhibit 452 – Statement of Deering (WIT.3004.019.0192) [46]

<sup>56</sup> Exhibit 459 – Statement of Siddle (WIT.115.001.0001\_R) [12]–[18]; Siddle T10290:15–T10292:16

<sup>57</sup> Exhibit 462 – Statement of Booker (SUMM.044.002.0277) at 0278

<sup>58</sup> Exhibit 452 – Statement of Deering (WIT.3004.019.0192) [46]; Exhibit 462 – Incident Information Summary for Redesdale Fire (TEN.129.001.0002); Exhibit 94 – Land and Fire Areas and Fire Towers (DOC.VGS.002.0001)

<sup>59</sup> Exhibit 452 – Statement of Deering (WIT.3004.019.0192) [40]

<sup>60</sup> Exhibit 452 – Statement of Deering (WIT.3004.019.0192) [46]



## 5 INCIDENT MANAGEMENT

- 5.1 The response to the Redesdale fire was managed by an Incident Management Team (IMT) based at a Level 3 Incident Control Centre (ICC) at the DSE office in Epsom, on the northern outskirts of Bendigo. The fire started on private land and burned mainly in areas for which the CFA was responsible, and the CFA was the control agency for the fire.<sup>61</sup>
- 5.2 The Redesdale fire occurred within CFA Region 2. John Deering, who became the initial Incident Controller for the fire, was the Operations Manager of Region 2. The Regional Duty Officer for 6 and 7 February 2009 was John Cutting, an Operations Officer in Region 2. Mr Cutting was also the manager of the Bendigo Regional Emergency Coordination Centre (RECC) on 7 February 2009.<sup>62</sup>
- 5.3 The management of CFA Region 2 had been aware from Wednesday 4 February 2009 of the extreme fire weather forecast for Saturday 7 February 2009. Fire weather briefings provided by the BOM to the integrated Emergency Co-ordination Centre (iECC) were sent to the Operations Manager and all Operations Officers.<sup>63</sup> The preparations undertaken in Region 2 on 6 February 2009 included:
- (a) circulating a preparedness list for 7 February 2009, in which people were allocated to specific roles in the Level 3 IMT at the Epsom ICC<sup>64</sup>
  - (b) Mr Cutting conducted a SMEACS (Situation, Mission, Execution, Administration, Communication, Safety) teleconference with Group Officers in Region 2<sup>65</sup>
  - (c) placing Region 2 on an E Level Response when, as anticipated, the Fire Danger Index went above 60, so that five brigades would automatically be paged to respond to a fire.<sup>66</sup>
- 5.4 The Murray Goldfields District in the North West Area of DSE had a similar level of preparedness. The district was on Level 4 standby for 7 February 2009, the highest level of standby. Five contract bulldozers were in place, at Castlemaine, Rheola, Heathcote, Landsborough and Charlton.<sup>67</sup>
- 5.5 On Thursday 5 February 2009 Mr Deering and his DSE counterpart, Andrew Matthews, the acting Area Land and Fire Manager decided to use 6 February 2009 to set up a Level 3 IMT at the Epsom ICC for a 'hot start' on 7 February 2009.<sup>68</sup> An

<sup>61</sup> Exhibit 452 – Statement of Deering (WIT.3004.019.0192) [37]

<sup>62</sup> Exhibit 460 – Statement of Cutting (WIT.3004.020.0001) [5], [11]

<sup>63</sup> Exhibit 452 – Statement of Deering, Annexure 4 (WIT.3004.019.0223, WIT.3004.019.0224); Exhibit 460 – Statement of Cutting (WIT.3004.020.0001) [10]; Annexure 3 (WIT.3004.020.0045)

<sup>64</sup> Exhibit 460 – Statement of Cutting (WIT.3004.020.0001) [14]; Annexure 6 (WIT.3004.020.0064, WIT.3004.020.0065, WIT.3004.020.0066)

<sup>65</sup> Exhibit 460 – Statement of Cutting (WIT.3004.020.0001) [15]–[20], Annexure 8 (WIT.3004.020.0080)

<sup>66</sup> Exhibit 460 – Statement of Cutting (WIT.3004.020.0001) [18]

<sup>67</sup> Exhibit 466 – Statement of Vearing (WIT.3024.004.0215) [19]

<sup>68</sup> Exhibit 452 – Statement of Deering (WIT.3004.019.0192) [25]; Exhibit 460 – Statement of Cutting (WIT.3004.020.0001) [21]

important component of this was to form a joint IMT, drawing on CFA and DSE staff with Level 3 qualifications and experience. The personnel who were to fill the positions in the Level 3 IMT on 7 February 2009 were identified on 6 February 2009 to be in place at the Epsom ICC on 7 February 2009.<sup>69</sup> Many of the IMT members were at the ICC on 6 February 2009 also, and used that day to confirm and test ground observer arrangements and begin fire behaviour prediction work for the following day.<sup>70</sup> Those present also participated in a practice scenario, involving a multi-agency response to a Level 3 fire.<sup>71</sup>

5.6 A fully staffed IMT was in place at the Epsom ICC from the morning of 7 February 2009. Mr Deering was there from 08:30, and jointly performed a leadership role with James Dalton from DSE. Both Mr Deering and Mr Dalton are approved as Level 3 incident controllers.<sup>72</sup> The other members of the IMT were:

- (a) Les Vearing, DSE, was the Operations Officer, assisted by Mark Gilmore and Brett Wagstaff of the CFA
- (b) the Planning Officers were Andrew Howlett, CFA, and Sharon Thomas, DSE
- (c) the Information Officers were Heather Shaw, DSE, and Peter Downes, CFA
- (d) Alan Buchanan, DSE, and John Stark, CFA, were the Logistics Officers<sup>73</sup>

All of these people were in place at the Epsom ICC by 11:00 on 7 February 2009.<sup>74</sup>

5.7 Mr Deering and Mr Dalton used the morning to ensure that each of the units were preparing for the day ahead. For example, the Planning Section was conducting fire behaviour predictions and ensuring that the ground observer team were in place; the Information Unit was preparing template fire information releases and establishing contacts with the ABC and local media.<sup>75</sup>

5.8 At about 15:11 the IMT received its first notification of the Redesdale fire from the Computer Aided Dispatch pagers.<sup>76</sup> As they monitored the initial radio traffic, Mr Deering and Mr Dalton discussed who would take on the role of Incident Controller, and who would be Deputy Incident Controller, in the likely event that control of the fire was transferred to the Epsom ICC. They decided that Mr Deering would be the Incident Controller and Mr Dalton would perform the role of Deputy Incident Controller.<sup>77</sup> It appears to have been assumed without discussion that the

<sup>69</sup> Exhibit 452 – Statement of Deering (WIT.3004.019.0192) [23]–[25]; Annexure 5 (WIT.3004.019.0269); Exhibit 466 – Statement of Vearing (WIT.3024.004.0215) [17]

<sup>70</sup> Exhibit 452 – Statement of Deering (WIT.3004.019.0192) [25]; Exhibit 466 – Statement of Vearing (WIT.3024.004.0215) [15]; Exhibit 458 – Statement of Gilmore (WIT.3004.019.0001) [12]

<sup>71</sup> Exhibit 452 – Statement of Deering (WIT.3004.019.0192) [29]; Annexure 6 (WIT.3004.019.0272) at 0272

<sup>72</sup> Exhibit 452 – Statement of Deering (WIT.3004.019.0192) [5]; Exhibit 466 – Statement of Vearing, Annexure 4 (DSE.HDD.0052.0651) at 0687

<sup>73</sup> Exhibit 452 – Statement of Deering (WIT.3004.019.0192) [26]; Annexure 5 (WIT.3004.019.0269) at 0269

<sup>74</sup> Deering T10151:13–T10151:18

<sup>75</sup> Exhibit 452 – Statement of Deering (WIT.3004.019.0192) [35]

<sup>76</sup> Exhibit 452 – Statement of Deering (WIT.3004.019.0192) [36]

<sup>77</sup> Exhibit 452 – Statement of Deering (WIT.3004.019.0192) [36]–[37]; Deering T10152:9–T10152:22

CFA would be the control agency for the fire.<sup>78</sup> In the Operations Unit, Mr Vearing and Mr Gilmore had also discussed the roles that they would assume in the event of a fire. They decided that, regardless of whether the DSE or the CFA was the control agency, Mr Vearing would be the Operations Officer and Mr Gilmore would be Assistant Operations Officer.<sup>79</sup>

- 5.9 Peter Wilson, Group Officer with the CFA Metcalfe Group, was the initial Level 1 Incident Controller at the fire ground. The IMT shadowed the first response, preparing to assume control on the basis that first attack was unlikely to succeed. At 15:30 Mr Wilson telephoned the ICC to advise that the fire was beyond the control of the initial resources of the responding brigades and requested that the Epsom ICC assume control. From that time until he ceased duty at about 09:00 the following day, Mr Deering was the Level 3 Incident Controller for the Redesdale fire.<sup>80</sup>
- 5.10 Craig Brittain, a career firefighter stationed at the Bendigo firefighter, was in the Bendigo RECC when the first report of the Redesdale fire was received through the pager system. Mr Cutting immediately despatched Mr Brittain to go forward to the fire ground, accompanied by Andrew Gill as his deputy.<sup>81</sup> Mr Brittain and Mr Gill arrived at the fire within 40 minutes, and made contact with Andy Chapman, the captain of the Elphinstone CFA.<sup>82</sup> Together they sectorised the fire, using a map drawn on the bonnet of Mr Brittain's car, and allocated senior volunteers as sector commanders.<sup>83</sup>
- 5.11 Mr Brittain, Mr Gill, Mr Chapman and others then moved to Redesdale, arriving between 16:00 and 16:30, where they found that the mobile control van (MCV) had arrived and was already setting up next to the Redesdale Hall. They established an Operations Point at Redesdale, operating out of the MCV. Mr Brittain assumed the role of Divisional Commander, with Mr Gill and Pat McCarthy of the DSE as Deputy Divisional Commanders. The sector commanders on the fire ground were Mr Chapman for the Sidonia sector, Peter Farley for the Metcalfe sector and Phil Anderson for the Redesdale sector. Bryan Suckling took control of the staging area, which was established next to the Redesdale Hall.<sup>84</sup>
- 5.12 Mr Deering as Incident Controller was not directly involved in decisions about the allocation of resources on the fire ground. He left those tactical decisions to the

<sup>78</sup> Exhibit 452 – Statement of Deering (WIT.3004.019.0192) [37]–[38]

<sup>79</sup> Exhibit 466 – Statement of Vearing (WIT.3024.004.0215) [22]; Exhibit 458 – Statement of Gilmore (WIT.3004.019.0001) [17]

<sup>80</sup> Exhibit 458 – Statement of Gilmore (WIT.3004.019.0001) [31]; Exhibit 452 – Statement of Deering (WIT.3004.019.0192) [39]–[40]; Deering T9960:11–T9960:15

<sup>81</sup> Exhibit 439 – Statement of Brittain (WIT.3004.020.0251) [25], [28]–[29]; Brittain T9970:17–T9970:26

<sup>82</sup> Exhibit 439 – Statement of Brittain (WIT.3004.020.0251) [31], [35]; Brittain T9970:27–T9971:11, T9972:5–T9973:20; Exhibit 462 – Statement of Chapman (SUMM.044.002.0109) at 0111

<sup>83</sup> Exhibit 439 – Statement of Brittain (WIT.3004.020.0251) [38]; Annexure 5 (WIT.3004.020.0274); Brittain T9974:5–T9974:21

<sup>84</sup> Exhibit 439 – Statement of Brittain (WIT.3004.020.0251) [40]–[43], [52]–[53]; Brittain T9975:14–T9976:23

commanders in the field, conceiving his role to be a more strategic one.<sup>85</sup> He and Mr Dalton had discussed beforehand how they would work together, with Mr Dalton taking on responsibility for internal management of the IMT, and Mr Deering concentrating on external relationships, including keeping the iECC and the public informed.<sup>86</sup>

- 5.13 The IMT gathered information about the Redesdale fire thoroughly and efficiently during the afternoon of 7 February 2009. The ground observer crew that had been prepositioned on 6 February 2009 was despatched promptly.<sup>87</sup> They, together with John Hosking, crew leader of the DSE Castlemaine crew, provided invaluable information about the movement of the fire to the IMT.<sup>88</sup> Mr Howlett, the Planning Officer, requested spot fire weather forecasts at 16:00 and again at 17:00. These were issued by the BOM within 30 minutes of being requested, and were passed on to the Operations Unit and the Information Officers.<sup>89</sup> Fire prediction maps were produced in the Epsom ICC at 15:55, 18:14 and 20:11, and were projected onto a screen for everyone in the IMT to see.<sup>90</sup> In addition, the IMT was monitoring radio communications and situation reports from the fire ground, pager messages and the CFA's Incident Management System (IMS).<sup>91</sup>
- 5.14 As this information came in to the ICC it was shared between all of the IMT personnel. Mr Deering explained:<sup>92</sup>
- We made a point of all the information we had was up and displayed, so at a glance people could see where the fire was and what we were doing.*
- 5.15 The way in which information was gathered and shared by the IMT at the Epsom ICC enabled it to assess which communities were at risk, to prepare and distribute timely and informative warnings to those communities, and to put in place appropriate road closures.<sup>93</sup> Most critically, it enabled the IMT to work out the strategy adopted in fighting the fire, which was to make a concentrated effort to secure the north eastern flank of the fire before the impending wind change, to protect the communities of Redesdale, Mia Mia and Heathcote further to the northeast.<sup>94</sup> This strategy was finalised within an hour of the Epsom ICC assuming control of the incident and was implemented in the two hours between then and the wind change.

<sup>85</sup> Exhibit 452 – Statement of Deering (WIT.3004.019.0192) [75]; Deering T10154:4–T10154:13

<sup>86</sup> Exhibit 452 – Statement of Deering (WIT.3004.019.0192) [75]; Deering T10154:14–T10154:27

<sup>87</sup> Deering T10151:23–T10152:8; T10153:14–T10153:15

<sup>88</sup> Exhibit 466 – Statement of Vearing (WIT.3024.004.0215) [34]; Exhibit 468 – Statement of Howlett (WIT.3004.020.0289) [40]

<sup>89</sup> Exhibit 468 – Statement of Howlett (WIT.3004.020.0289) [35]; Exhibit 22 – Statement of Williams, Annexure 1 (WIT.013.001.0012) at 0194–0195, 0210–0211

<sup>90</sup> Deering T10159:5–T10161:14; Exhibit 453 – Fire prediction maps (TEN.127.001.0001)

<sup>91</sup> Exhibit 452 – Statement of Deering (WIT.3004.019.0192) [41], [43]–[44]; Deering T10157:21–T10157:30

<sup>92</sup> Deering T10161:9–T10161:12

<sup>93</sup> Exhibit 452 – Statement of Deering (WIT.3004.019.0192) [41]

<sup>94</sup> Deering T9961:2–T9962:7; T10160:8–T10160:27

- 5.16 It was a feature of the way in which Mr Deering discharged his responsibilities as Incident Controller that he prioritised the sharing of information, within the IMT, with the iECC and with the public. He explained the reason for his approach:<sup>95</sup>

*My role and my experience has been, going back to the original lessons of bushfire fighting that we were taught when I was younger, was the more information and the more accurate information you can keep providing, both up and down the chain, the more likely you are to achieve a good result.*

Mr Deering focused on providing timely, regular information updates through Preliminary Incident Reports (PIRs) entered directly into the IMS. These PIRs are then available to anyone in the CFA with access to the IMS, including senior staff in the iECC.<sup>96</sup> The PIRs for the Redesdale fire provided clear, concise updates about the movement and potential of the fire and the strategy being implemented to contain it.<sup>97</sup>

- 5.17 Consistent with this approach to timely information sharing, a red flag warning was issued by Mr Gill, the Deputy Divisional Commander, at 17:30. At 17:24 the Redesdale operations point was contacted by Mr Farley, the sector commander for the Metcalfe sector, seeking information about the status of the wind change, in light of reports that the wind change had reached Trentham. Information was sought about the wind change and at 17:30 the following entry appears in the log kept for the MCV at the Redesdale operations point:<sup>98</sup>

1730      All stations      Red flag warning – Wind change  
@1830-1900      SW      Strong 50km-70km

It is apparent from log entries made by Mr Howlett, one of the Planning Officers, and Mr Vearing, the Operations Officer, that both the Planning Unit and the Operations Unit became aware shortly before 17:30 that the wind change was forecast to occur between 18:30 and 19:00.<sup>99</sup> This may have been because of the receipt of a new spot fire weather forecast issued by the BOM at around this time.<sup>100</sup> Within minutes a red flag warning had been transmitted from the Epsom ICC to the Redesdale operations point, and passed on to all stations on the fire ground.<sup>101</sup>

- 5.18 At 10,000 hectares, the Redesdale fire was the largest fire to have occurred in CFA

<sup>95</sup> Deering T10155:18–T10155:24

<sup>96</sup> Exhibit 452 – Statement of Deering (WIT.3004.019.0192) [43]; Annexure 12 (WIT.3004.019.0328); Deering T10155:10–T10157:17

<sup>97</sup> Exhibit 452 – Statement of Deering, Annexure 12 (WIT.3004.019.0328)

<sup>98</sup> Exhibit 439 – Statement of Brittain, Annexure 6 (WIT.3004.020.0275) at 0276

<sup>99</sup> Exhibit 468 – Statement of Howlett, Annexure 3 (WIT.3004.020.0304) at 0307; Exhibit 466 – Statement of Vearing, Annexure 5 (DSE.HDD.0052.0793) at 0794, Annexure 6 (DSE.HDD.0052.0745) at 0748

<sup>100</sup> Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Redesdale Fire on 7 February 2009 (BOM.901.0213) at 0247; see paragraph 3.9 above

<sup>101</sup> Exhibit 466 – Statement of Vearing, Annexure 6 (DSE.HDD.0052.0745) at 0748; Exhibit 439 – Statement of Brittain, Annexure 6 (WIT.3004.020.0276)

Region 2.<sup>102</sup> The evidence before the Commission is consistent with the Incident Controller's own assessment of the management of the fire by his IMT.<sup>103</sup>

*The Redesdale fire ran 19 kilometres from the point of origin but, after the wind change, the fire only ran another 3 kilometres. This was as a result of the work that was done (including through the use of dozers and graders) on the north eastern flank prior to the wind change. This work helped to protect Redesdale and Mia Mia. The main run of the fire was contained on 7 February.*

...

*Overall, the information that I received from the field (that is from CFA and DSE Fire members on the fire front) was adequate and timely. This I believe was as a direct result of the valuable pre-planning and effective communications on both 6 and 7 February.*

- 5.19 The effective management of the Redesdale fire by the Epsom ICC is testament to the importance of good planning leading up to a day of extreme fire danger, in particular repositioning properly qualified and experienced staff in an ICC. It also highlights the value of focussing on gathering and sharing information within the IMT, within the fire agencies and with the public.

## 6 RESPONSE

- 6.1 The first brigades to be sent to respond to the Redesdale fire were the Redesdale, Metcalfe, Sutton Grange, Langley-Barfold and Mia Mia brigades, who were dispatched by VicFire by pager at 15:12.<sup>104</sup> Shortly afterwards the Redesdale, Mia Mia and Elphinstone brigades were paged to respond to the fire at the Siddle's house in Racecourse Road, Redesdale.<sup>105</sup> The two strike teams that had been assembled in CFA Region 2 to respond to the Kilmore East fire were redirected to the Redesdale fire by Mr Cutting at the Bendigo RECC.<sup>106</sup> At 15:43 Michelle Cannon at the Bendigo RECC rang VicFire and asked them to respond an additional 30 tankers to the Redesdale fire.<sup>107</sup> Mr Deering rang Mr Brittain as he was driving towards Redesdale to say that he had sent him 40 trucks.<sup>108</sup>
- 6.2 Andrew Chapman, Captain of the Elphinstone brigade, was among the first to respond to the fire. Shortly after 15:25 he went to the Elphinstone fire station where he learned that there was a fire at Racecourse Road, Redesdale.<sup>109</sup>

<sup>102</sup> Exhibit 452 – Statement of Deering (WIT.3004.019.0192) [74]; Deering T9957:20

<sup>103</sup> Exhibit 452 – Statement of Deering (WIT.3004.019.0192) [74], [112]

<sup>104</sup> Deering T9960:3–T9960:6; Exhibit 452 – Statement of Deering (WIT.3004.019.0192) [36], [46]; Exhibit 462 – Statement of Booker (SUMM.044.002.0277) at 0277

<sup>105</sup> Exhibit 462 – Statement of Chapman (SUMM.044.002.0109) at 0109; Statement of Booker (SUMM.044.002.0277) at 0278

<sup>106</sup> Exhibit 460 – Statement of Cutting (WIT.3004.020.0001) [35], [39]–[40]; Cutting T10321:7–T10322:1

<sup>107</sup> Exhibit 460 – Statement of Cutting (WIT.3004.020.0001) [45]

<sup>108</sup> Exhibit 439 – Statement of Brittain (WIT.3004.020.0251) [30]; Brittain T9971:5

<sup>109</sup> Exhibit 462 – Statement of Chapman (SUMM.044.002.0109) at 0109

*I then turned out in then Forward Control Vehicle (FCV) and I had my wife Kath as my penciller. I made my way to Summerhill, this area around Summerhill Road. On the way I went up to the top of Granite Hill. I could see that the smoke was going. It was sliding through the contours of the land and there was a north westerly wind. I also put in a request for ten tankers and two strike teams. A short time later I put in a request for the Golden Square Mobile Communications Van (MCV).*

Mr Chapman drove east along the Metcalfe-Redesdale Road, past the intersection with Summerhill Road, and gained an understanding of how large the fire had become:<sup>110</sup>

*It was at this time I realised that this was a large fire and I needed to set up a control point and wanted to set it up at the corner of Kyneton/Redesdale Road and Siddles Road. We started to head to this point and I heard on the radio that a tanker put in a report that they had held the fire on Summerhill Road. My reply to this report was that this fire was out of control and had gone way past Summerhill Road. As we were driving out of this property we looked to the left and saw a spot fire, we exited the property and headed east on Metcalfe-Redesdale Road. I was contacted by DGO Dave Penno and we were to meet at Metcalfe-Redesdale Road and Racecourse Road. When I first saw the spot fire in the driveway I believed it to be spotting from the fire front but I didn't believe the fire was close. In the 20 seconds or so it took to drive to Racecourse Road where we were to meet DGO PENNO the fire impacted at the intersection of Racecourse Road as we arrived. The impact has come from the northwest and started to jump the Metcalfe/Redesdale Road, Siddles Road extension.*

*I told DGO PENNO to get in his ute and get out of here and we drove east along Siddles Road under a lot of impact. The reason we did this was because the intersection of Racecourse Road and Siddles Road was extremely unsafe. We drove out of the fire impact about 600 metre[s] east of the intersection Racecourse Road and fire continued in a south easterly direction.*

As Mr Chapman continued east along Siddles Road he realised that his vehicle was on fire. After attempting to put the fire out, he and Mr Penno set up a control point on the Heathcote-Kyneton Road at the intersection with Perry's Lane. It was here that Mr Brittain and Mr Gill found them.<sup>111</sup>

- 6.3 For their part, Mr Brittain and Mr Gill had driven from Bendigo to the western flank of the fire, which had jumped the Metcalfe-Redesdale Road by the time they arrived:<sup>112</sup>

*The fire had jumped the road and crossed the grass paddocks. There was still a lot of fire activity on both sides of the roads and in the paddocks. The grass had a very intense flame and was leaning with the strong wind behind it. I remember seeing that in some spots the flames were up to one to two metres high.*

They drove through the fire to reach Mr Chapman on the eastern side of the

<sup>110</sup> Exhibit 462 – Statement of Chapman (SUMM.044.002.0109) at 0010

<sup>111</sup> Exhibit 462 – Statement of Chapman (SUMM.044.002.0109) at 0010–0111; Exhibit 439 – Statement of Brittain (WIT.3004.020.0251) [35]

<sup>112</sup> Exhibit 439 – Statement of Brittain (WIT.3004.020.0251) [33]; Brittain T9972:5–T9973:3

fire.<sup>113</sup>

- 6.4 Mr Chapman was able to brief Mr Brittain and Mr Gill and together they formulated a strategy and sectorised the fire into three sectors.<sup>114</sup> During their discussion they were joined by others including Roy Speechley from DSE and Peter Dyer from Victoria Police.<sup>115</sup> Mr Brittain outlined the strategy that was adopted:<sup>116</sup>

*Our strategy was to attack the head, if possible, and work on the flank. We knew from the weather forecast previously that we would be getting a change later in the evening, so the primary flank that we would be looking at would be the north-eastern flank or the eastern flank to ensure that we had that stitched up before the wind change had come through.*

It was too dangerous to attack the head of the fire at that point, and so resources were to be concentrated on the flanks of the fire, mainly the eastern flank.<sup>117</sup> It was clear to those assembled at the control point how severe the fire was and the potential it had to travel a great distance.<sup>118</sup> At that stage they had to move away from the fire to Redesdale where they found the MCV being set up next to the Redesdale Hall.<sup>119</sup> An operations point was established there at around 16:00, operating out of the MCV.<sup>120</sup>

- 6.5 Pat McCarthy of the Heathcote DSE crew joined Mr Brittain and Mr Gill at the operations point, as a Deputy Divisional Commander.<sup>121</sup> The operations team met again to confirm their strategy before the wind change – to get as many resources as possible to the eastern flank of the fire.
- 6.6 Containment lines were established wherever possible along the north eastern flank of the fire, using dozers and graders, supported by slip on units and tankers.<sup>122</sup> Graders followed the run of the fire along the northern flank, and containment lines were put in along Siddles Road and back from Racecourse Road into the bush, near the point of origin.<sup>123</sup> Mr Brittain asked Mr McCarthy to arrange for a couple of graders to put a fire break in front of the Redesdale township.<sup>124</sup> More work was done along the Burke and Wills Track, near Mia Mia.<sup>125</sup> While this work was limited by the often difficult terrain, crews were able

<sup>113</sup> Exhibit 439 – Statement of Brittain (WIT.3004.020.0251) [35]; Brittain T9973:3–T9973:15

<sup>114</sup> Refer to paragraph 5.10-5.11 above

<sup>115</sup> Exhibit 439 – Statement of Brittain (WIT.3004.020.0251) [39]

<sup>116</sup> Brittain T9974:22-T9974:29

<sup>117</sup> Brittain T9974:30–T9975:3

<sup>118</sup> Brittain T9975:14–T9975:20

<sup>119</sup> Brittain T9975:2–T9975:25; Exhibit 439 – Statement of Brittain (WIT.3004.020.0251) [43]

<sup>120</sup> Exhibit 439 – Statement of Brittain (WIT.3004.020.0251) [43]; Exhibit 466 – Statement of Vearing (WIT.3024.004.0215) [33]

<sup>121</sup> Exhibit 466 – Statement of Vearing (WIT.3024.004.0215) [33]

<sup>122</sup> Exhibit 466 – Statement of Vearing (WIT.3024.004.0215) [40]

<sup>123</sup> Exhibit 466 – Statement of Vearing (WIT.3024.004.0215) [41]; Exhibit 439 – Statement of Brittain (WIT.3004.020.0251) [49]

<sup>124</sup> Exhibit 439 – Statement of Brittain (WIT.3004.020.0251) [46]

<sup>125</sup> Exhibit 439 – Statement of Brittain (WIT.3004.020.0251) [49]



to establish effective containment lines along most of the north eastern flank of the fire before the wind changed.<sup>126</sup>

- 6.7 Tankers were unable to attack the head of the fire before the wind change, and were allocated to support the crews building containment lines, to direct attack on the flanks of the fire and to some asset protection work.<sup>127</sup>
- 6.8 Robert Jarvis of Parks Victoria had been on standby at the Bendigo Airport as Air Attack Supervisor for the Epsom ICC.<sup>128</sup> The high winds and turbulence on 7 February 2009 meant that for a large proportion of the day it was not safe to fly. However, by 17:40 the wind had begun to moderate and Firebird 318 was able to take off from Bendigo Airport to conduct reconnaissance for the Redesdale fire.<sup>129</sup> Mr Jarvis was able to provide some information to Mr Vearing at the Epsom ICC about the location of the head of the fire and the northern flank.<sup>130</sup> However, his work was hampered by extreme turbulence and poor visibility and the helicopter returned to Bendigo before the forecast wind change.<sup>131</sup>
- 6.9 After the wind change the weather conditions began to moderate and the fire behaviour became more subdued.<sup>132</sup> Soon after 20:00 Mr Vearing was sufficiently confident that the fire would be contained overnight to cancel an earlier request that the army provide graders, and to decide that DSE did not need to allocate any further resources to the Redesdale fire.<sup>133</sup>
- 6.10 Mr Deering summarised the resources used in the response to the Redesdale fire. There were 55 CFA tankers from CFA Regions 2, 15 and 12; 10 CFA forward control vehicles; 6 CFA slip-on units; a big fill unit; 11 DSE slip-ons; 3 DSE bulldozers; 5 municipal graders and other plant and private equipment. There were more than 600 firefighting personnel deployed on 7 February 2009 and in the week following. The fire was controlled and then completely blacked out by 14 February 2009.<sup>134</sup>

## 7 EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

- 7.1 The Redesdale fire burned in four separate municipalities. It started in the City of Greater Bendigo, burned mainly in the Mount Alexander Shire and a small part of Mitchell Shire, and extended into Macedon Ranges Shire.<sup>135</sup>

<sup>126</sup> Exhibit 439 – Statement of Brittain (WIT.3004.020.0251) [49]–[50]

<sup>127</sup> Exhibit 466 – Statement of Vearing (WIT.3024.004.0215) [42]

<sup>128</sup> Exhibit 463 – Statement of Jarvis (VPO.001.012.0032) at 0032

<sup>129</sup> Exhibit 463 – Statement of Jarvis (VPO.001.012.0032) at 0032–0033; Exhibit 466 – Statement of Vearing (WIT.3024.004.0215) [43]

<sup>130</sup> Exhibit 463 – Statement of Jarvis (VPO.001.012.0032) at 0033; Exhibit 466 – Statement of Vearing (WIT.3024.004.0215) [48],[50]

<sup>131</sup> Exhibit 463 – Statement of Jarvis (VPO.001.012.0032) at 0033

<sup>132</sup> Exhibit 439 – Statement of Brittain (WIT.3004.020.0251) [51]

<sup>133</sup> Exhibit 466 – Statement of Vearing (WIT.3024.004.0215) [54], [56]–[57]

<sup>134</sup> Deering T9957:28–T9958:10

<sup>135</sup> Deering T9962:17–T9962:20

- 7.2 Superintendent Peter Bull is the Divisional Emergency Response Co-ordinator (DERC) for Region 3, Division 3, which incorporates the municipalities of Greater Bendigo, Mount Alexander and Macedon Ranges. By Friday 6 February 2009 he had ascertained that each of those municipalities were prepared to activate their Municipal Emergency Co-ordination Centre (MECC) if required.<sup>136</sup> He was already at the Epsom ICC when the Redesdale fire commenced, and for a while performed the roles of police liaison, command operations and DERC simultaneously.<sup>137</sup>
- 7.3 Superintendent Bull was able to relay promptly requests from the ICC for tankers and graders to Sergeant Grant Morris, the Bendigo Municipal Emergency Response Co-ordinator (MERC).<sup>138</sup> Sergeant Morris transmitted the requests to the Municipal Emergency Response Officer (MERO) for Greater Bendigo, Alex Malone, who arranged for the equipment requested to be provided.<sup>139</sup>
- 7.4 Mr Malone provided the Commission with a statement outlining the Municipal Emergency Management Plan for the City of Greater Bendigo (Bendigo MEMP) and the emergency response within that municipality on 7 February 2009.<sup>140</sup> That response was largely concerned with the fire that broke out near Bracewell Street, Long Gully, a suburb to the north west of Bendigo.
- 7.5 An emergency relief centre was established at the Redesdale Hall soon after the fire commenced,<sup>141</sup> and Sergeant Morris was advised of the establishment of an evacuation centre at Barrack Reserve at Heathcote.<sup>142</sup> Both of these locations are listed as potential emergency relief centres in the Bendigo MEMP.<sup>143</sup>
- 7.6 Mr Deering told the Commission that the shires of Mount Alexander and Macedon Ranges provided a great deal of support, given that Greater Bendigo and Mitchell were fully occupied with other fires in their municipalities.<sup>144</sup> Angie Laussel, recovery manager for Macedon Ranges Shire, was interviewed on ABC 774 at 19:15, advising people affected by the Redesdale fire of relief centres open at the Castlemaine and Kyneton town halls.<sup>145</sup> Otherwise, the detail of the emergency response by Mount Alexander Shire and Macedon Ranges Shire is largely unknown, as no statements of MERCs or MEROs for those municipalities were provided to the Commission.

<sup>136</sup> Exhibit 454 – Statement of Bull (WIT.3010.009.0001) [11]; Attachment 6 (WIT.3010.009.0057)

<sup>137</sup> Exhibit 454 – Statement of Bull (WIT.3010.009.0001) [28]; Bull T10172:17–T10172:31

<sup>138</sup> Exhibit 454 – Statement of Bull (WIT.3010.009.0001) [28]–[29]

<sup>139</sup> Exhibit 464 – Statement of Morris (WIT.3010.007.0298 ) [21]–[22]; Exhibit 465 – Statement of Malone (WIT.4010.001.0001) [60]

<sup>140</sup> Exhibit 465 – Statement of Malone (WIT.4010.001.0001)

<sup>141</sup> Exhibit 439 – Statement of Brittain (WIT.3004.020.0251) [43]

<sup>142</sup> Exhibit 464 – Statement of Morris (WIT.3010.007.0298 ) [31]

<sup>143</sup> Exhibit 465 – Statement of Malone, Attachment 2 (WIT.4010.001.0017) at 0149

<sup>144</sup> Deering T9962:20–T9962:25

<sup>145</sup> Exhibit 7 – Transcript, 774 ABC Radio Broadcast – Saturday, 7 February 2009 7am – Midnight (SUMM.001.002.0001) at 410:17-411:33

## 8 WARNINGS

- 8.1 Two Information Officers were present at the Epsom ICC before the Redesdale fire began: Peter Downes, Group Officer of the CFA Bendigo Group, and Heather Shaw of the DSE. Mr Downes provided a statement to the Commission. He is an experienced volunteer firefighter, a Level 2 Planning Officer and has undertaken training in information management and media liaison. He had previously acted as an Information Officer in the Dargo ICC in 2006.<sup>146</sup> With two staff in place in the Information Unit before the outbreak of fire, at least one of whom had a suitable level of training and experience, the Epsom ICC was able to issue timely, accurate and informative warnings of the likely impact of a fast moving fire.
- 8.2 Mr Downes and Ms Shaw used the morning of 7 February 2009 to check and update their email distribution list and to make contact with manager of the local ABC radio station and the Information Unit at the iECC.<sup>147</sup> On becoming aware of the fire at Redesdale, Mr Downs and Ms Shaw promptly prepared an Awareness Message for the communities in the area of Metcalfe, Metcalfe East, Barfold, Langley and Redesdale. This message, approved by Mr Deering and distributed by email at 15:37, stated:<sup>148</sup>

*A fire is burning 9 kilometres west of Redesdale, in grassland in the vicinity of Coliban Park Road (Vicroads Map reference Map 59 J2). It is burning in a south easterly direction and is estimated to be [left blank] hectares in size. This fire is not currently posing a threat to communities. However, communities in the Metcalfe, Metcalfe East, Barfold, Langley and Redesdale areas should be aware of possible imminent fire threat.*

Mr Downes then made telephone contact with the local ABC and with the iECC to confirm that it had received the message.<sup>149</sup> The message was broadcast on ABC Bendigo 91.1FM (ABC Bendigo) at 15:53,<sup>150</sup> and on ABC 774 at 15:50.<sup>151</sup>

- 8.3 An Urgent Threat Message for the communities of Barfold, Langley and Metcalfe East was distributed by the Information Unit at 15:57: It advised:<sup>152</sup>

*The Coliban Park Road, Redesdale fire, burning 9 kilometres west of Redesdale, south of Lake Eppalock is burning in a south easterly direction and is developing quickly. The communities of Barfold, Langley and Metcalfe East may be directly impacted upon by this fire.*

<sup>146</sup> Exhibit 469 – Statement of Downes (WIT.3004.020.0314) [1]–[4], [16]

<sup>147</sup> Exhibit 469 – Statement of Downes (WIT.3004.020.0314) [17]

<sup>148</sup> Exhibit 469 – Statement of Downes (WIT.3004.020.0314) [19]–[20]; Annexure 5 (WIT.3004.020.0340); Exhibit 452 – Statement of Deering (WIT.3004.019.0192) [77]; Annexure 10 (WIT.3004.019.0324)

<sup>149</sup> Exhibit 469 – Statement of Downes (WIT.3004.020.0314) [21]

<sup>150</sup> Exhibit 144 – ABC Local Radio – Disc 1 (TEN.052.001.0001)

<sup>151</sup> Exhibit 7 – Transcript, 774 ABC Radio Broadcast – Saturday, 7 February 2009 7am – Midnight (SUMM.001.002.0001) at 290:41-291:8

<sup>152</sup> Exhibit 469 – Statement of Downes (WIT.3004.020.0314) [22]–[23]; Annexure 6 (WIT.3004.020.0342); Exhibit 452 – Statement of Deering (WIT.3004.019.0192) [79]; Annexure 11 (WIT.3004.019.0326)

The message was read on ABC Bendigo at 16:05, 16:15 and 16:30,<sup>153</sup> and on ABC 774 at 16:00 and at 16:15.<sup>154</sup> It was posted on the CFA website at 16:13.<sup>155</sup>

8.4 A further Urgent Threat Message for Barfold, Langley and Metcalfe East was issued at 16:30, and the communities of Sidonia, Pastoria and to the east of Kyneton were advised to be alert and to put their fire plans in action.<sup>156</sup> This warning was posted on the CFA website at 16:47.<sup>157</sup> It was read on ABC Bendigo at 16:46, 16:53 and 16:58 and repeated at 17:04 and 17:10. ABC 774 broadcast the message in part at 16:47 and in full at 17:00 and 17:10.<sup>158</sup>

8.5 The next Urgent Threat Message was issued at 17:20 for Barfold, Langley, Metcalfe East, Sidonia, Pastoria and communities east of Kyneton. The message included current information about the location of the fire, in the following terms:<sup>159</sup>

*A grass fire that started 9 kilometres west of Redesdale south of Lake Eppalock has burnt in a south easterly direction and is estimated to be 2000 hectares in size. The fire has crossed the Heathcote-Redesdale road in the vicinity of Barfold and has also crossed the Campaspe river. The head of the fire is currently approaching Sidonia. The communities of Barfold, Langley, Metcalfe East, Pastoria and other communities to the east of Kyneton may be impacted directly by this fire. Residents in the Pipers Creek, Carlsruhe, Woodend North, Newham, Cadello and Carbor areas are advised to be alert and implement their fire plans. This fire continues to move rapidly.*

The message was posted on the CFA website at 17:57.<sup>160</sup> It was broadcast on ABC Bendigo at 17:25 and repeated several times over the next 30 minutes,<sup>161</sup> and on ABC 774 at 17:40.<sup>162</sup>

8.6 At 17:45 the Epsom ICC issued a further Urgent Threat Message that incorporated advice about the timing and likely impact of the impending south west wind change. The information about the wind change relayed the updated spot fire weather forecast issued by the BOM for the Redesdale fire at 17:32.<sup>163</sup>

*A grass fire that started 9 kilometres west of Redesdale south of Lake Eppalock has burnt in a south easterly direction and is estimated to be over 2000 hectares in size. The*

<sup>153</sup> Exhibit 144 – ABC Local Radio – Disc 1 (TEN.052.001.0001)

<sup>154</sup> Exhibit 7 – Transcript, 774 ABC Radio Broadcast – Saturday, 7 February 2009 7am – Midnight (SUMM.001.002.0001) at 298:2 and 305:42

<sup>155</sup> Exhibit 3 – Statement of Rees, Annexure 31 (WIT.004.001.0509) at 0547

<sup>156</sup> Exhibit 469 – Statement of Downes (WIT.3004.020.0314) [26]–[27]; Annexure 7 (WIT.3004.020.0344)

<sup>157</sup> Exhibit 3 – Statement of Rees, Annexure 31 (WIT.004.001.0509) at 0559

<sup>158</sup> Exhibit 7 – Transcript, 774 ABC Radio Broadcast – Saturday, 7 February 2009 7am – Midnight (SUMM.001.002.0001) at 326:13-326:22, 333:12-333:18, 336:34-336:38

<sup>159</sup> Exhibit 469 – Statement of Downes (WIT.3004.020.0314) [31]–[32]; Annexure 8 (WIT.3004.020.0346); Exhibit 452 – Statement of Deering (WIT.3004.019.0192) [81]; Annexure 12 (WIT.3004.019.0328)

<sup>160</sup> Exhibit 3 – Statement of Rees, Annexure 31 (WIT.004.001.0509) at 0578

<sup>161</sup> Exhibit 144 – ABC Local Radio – Disc 1 (TEN.052.001.0001)

<sup>162</sup> Exhibit 7 – Transcript, 774 ABC Radio Broadcast – Saturday, 7 February 2009 7am – Midnight (SUMM.001.002.0001) at 354:26-354:47

<sup>163</sup> Exhibit 469 – Statement of Downes (WIT.3004.020.0314) [35]–[36]; Annexure 9 (WIT.3004.020.0348); Exhibit 452 – Statement of Deering (WIT.3004.019.0192) [83]; Annexure 13 (WIT.3004.019.0330)

*fire has crossed the Heathcote-Redesdale road in the vicinity of Barfold and has also crossed the Campaspe river and Watchbox Road. A strong, wind change from the south west is expected in the area between 6.30pm and 7.00pm.*

*The head of the fire is currently in the Sidonia area. The communities of Barfold, Langley, Metcalfe East, Pastoria and other communities to the east of Kyneton may be impacted directly by this fire. Residents in the Pipers Creek, Carlsruhe, Woodend North, Newham, Cadello and Carbor areas are advised to be alert and implement their fire plans.*

*When the wind change arrives at the fire it will run in a north easterly direction, and residents in the following localities need to be alert and implement their fire plans. Redesdale, Glenhope, Baynton and Baynton East. Residents in the areas between Glenhope, Baynton, Redesdale and Heathcote, Tooborac, Pyalong need to be aware that these communities may also be under threat when the wind change passes through.*

This message appeared on the CFA website at 18:00.<sup>164</sup> It was referred to in the news bulletin at 18:00 on ABC Bendigo, and four more times over the next hour.<sup>165</sup> It was read on ABC 774 at 18:10 and recapped at 18:30.<sup>166</sup>

8.7 A further Urgent Threat Message in similar terms, reiterating the warning of the imminent wind change, was issued at 18:40.<sup>167</sup> That message was summarised on ABC 774 at 18:50 and repeated at 19:31<sup>168</sup> and was posted on the CFA website at 19:11.<sup>169</sup>

8.8 Mr Downes left the Epsom ICC at about 19:00 to go to the Adam Street ICC, which was managing the Bracewell Street fire in Bendigo.<sup>170</sup> Soon after his departure, Ms Shaw prepared another Urgent Threat Message that described the effect of the wind change on the fire's behaviour. The message was issued at 19:10 and warned residents in the same communities as the two preceding messages, with the following variation:<sup>171</sup>

*Since the wind change the fire has been burning in a north easterly direction. The rate of spread has slowed but residents in the following localities need to be alert and implement their fire plans.*

This message, however, does not appear to have been distributed as effectively as earlier messages. The threat message posted to the CFA website at 20:38<sup>172</sup> and read on ABC 774 at 20:48<sup>173</sup> was in the same terms as the earlier threat message

<sup>164</sup> Exhibit 3 – Statement of Rees, Annexure 31 (WIT.004.001.0509) at 0579

<sup>165</sup> Exhibit 144 – ABC Local Radio – Disc 1 (TEN.052.001.0001)

<sup>166</sup> Exhibit 7 – Transcript, 774 ABC Radio Broadcast – Saturday, 7 February 2009 7am – Midnight (SUMM.001.002.0001) at 371:43, 383:43

<sup>167</sup> Exhibit 469 – Statement of Downes (WIT.3004.020.0314) [37]–[38]; Annexure 10 (WIT.3004.020.0348);

Exhibit 452 – Statement of Deering (WIT.3004.019.0192) [85]–[86]; Annexure 14 (WIT.3004.019.0331)

<sup>168</sup> Exhibit 7 – Transcript, 774 ABC Radio Broadcast – Saturday, 7 February 2009 7am – Midnight (SUMM.001.002.0001) at 398:1-378:8, 420:42

<sup>169</sup> Exhibit 3 – Statement of Rees, Annexure 31 (WIT.004.001.0509) at 0597

<sup>170</sup> Exhibit 469 – Statement of Downes (WIT.3004.020.0314) [41]–[42]

<sup>171</sup> Exhibit 452 – Statement of Deering (WIT.3004.019.0192) [88]–[89]; Annexure 15 (WIT.3004.019.0334)

<sup>172</sup> Exhibit 3 – Statement of Rees, Annexure 31 (WIT.004.001.0509) at 0618

<sup>173</sup> Exhibit 7 – Transcript, 774 ABC Radio Broadcast – Saturday, 7 February 2009 7am – Midnight (SUMM.001.002.0001) at 462:33-463:33

issued by the Epsom ICC at 17:45 and 18:40.

- 8.9 Urgent threat messages for Baynton and Glenhope, advising them of likely fire activity overnight, were issued by the Epsom ICC at 22:20 and at 23:55.<sup>174</sup> These were posted to the CFA website at 22:40 and at 00:11.<sup>175</sup> The earlier of these messages was read on ABC 774 at 23:05.<sup>176</sup>

## 9 ROADBLOCKS

- 9.1 The Victoria Police response to the Redesdale fire was principally concerned with establishing roadblocks to the area affected or threatened by the fire. Sergeant Matt Rowley from Castlemaine managed roadblocks at the northern end of the fire, from Redesdale, and Detective Sergeant Shane Brundell and Senior Sergeant Ian Brookes managed roadblocks at the southern end of the fire, from Gisborne.<sup>177</sup> Decisions about road closures at the northern end of the fire appear to have been made at the Epsom ICC and implemented by police working from the Redesdale Hall.<sup>178</sup> The communications between the Epsom ICC and police at Redesdale were better than those with police at the southern end of the fire, who had great difficulty in tracking the fire due to lack of information and received no requests for the establishment of roadblocks.<sup>179</sup>
- 9.2 At 15:47 someone in the IMT requested Superintendent Bull to arrange for the Heathcote-Kyneton Road to be closed, at both the Redesdale and the Kyneton ends. He relayed this request through D24.<sup>180</sup> The road closure was noted on the Urgent Threat Message issued by the Epsom ICC at 15:55, and in subsequent threat messages.<sup>181</sup> By 17:20 the Metcalfe-Redesdale Road and Watchbox Road were also closed,<sup>182</sup> and later the Burke and Wills Track was closed between Mia Mia and the Kyneton-Baynton Road.<sup>183</sup>
- 9.3 At the southern end of the fire, Detective Sergeant Brundell arranged road closures at Baynton-Pyalong Road, Baynton Road and at both ends of Sidonia Road from 17:45. He was assisted in planning these road closures by a fire prediction map supplied to him by Epsom ICC via the Gisborne ICC, located next door to the

<sup>174</sup> Exhibit 452 – Statement of Deering (WIT.3004.019.0192) [90]–[93]; Annexure 16 (WIT.3004.019.0336); Annexure 17 (WIT.3004.019.0338)

<sup>175</sup> Exhibit 3 – Statement of Rees, Annexure 31 (WIT.004.001.0509) at 0644 and 0656–0657

<sup>176</sup> Exhibit 7 – Transcript, 774 ABC Radio Broadcast – Saturday, 7 February 2009 7am – Midnight (SUMM.001.002.0001) at 541:32-542:7

<sup>177</sup> Exhibit 454 – Statement of Bull (WIT.3010.009.0001) [29]–[30]; Exhibit 473 – Statement of Brundell (WIT.3010.006.0215) [14], [19]–[22]

<sup>178</sup> Exhibit 439 – Statement of Brittain (WIT.3004.020.0251) [72]–[74]

<sup>179</sup> Exhibit 439 – Statement of Brittain (WIT.3004.020.0251) [72]–[74]; Exhibit 473 – Statement of Brundell (WIT.3010.006.0215) [20]–[22]

<sup>180</sup> Exhibit 454 – Statement of Bull (WIT.3010.009.0001) [29]

<sup>181</sup> Exhibit 452 – Statement of Deering, Annexure 11 (WIT.3004.019.0326); Annexure 13 (WIT.3004.019.0330)

<sup>182</sup> Exhibit 452 – Statement of Deering, Annexure 12 (WIT.3004.019.0328)

<sup>183</sup> Exhibit 452 – Statement of Deering, Annexure 14 (WIT.3004.019.0332)

Gisborne Divisional Operations Centre (DOC).<sup>184</sup> Otherwise, he and Senior Sergeant Brooks at the Gisborne DOC had to make decisions about road closures based on limited information:<sup>185</sup>

*I cannot recall receiving any requests for any TMPs. All TMPs were Full Road Closures and units were well aware that only fire fighting vehicles could pass through these TMPs. As the fires were moving quite quickly, the establishment and closure of TMPs had to be very fluid to ensure that vehicles were restricted from approaching the fire. I was advised by police units that some residents were attempting to pass the Full Road Closures in order to return to their properties throughout the evening. All police units were ordered not to allow residents wanting to return to their properties to pass through the Road Closures due to the extreme fire danger and risk to life, however the units were also instructed to allow residents escaping the fire danger to pass through the Road Closures to safety. I am aware that some residents wanting to return to their properties chose to bypass the Road Closures by accessing their properties via back roads and tracks.*

- 9.4 Later in the evening, when the fire was more or less under control, Mr Brittain raised with Mr Deering the possibility of beginning to open up some roads, particularly those near Kyneton.<sup>186</sup>
- 9.5 Residents and firefighters in the area affected by the Redesdale fire do not appear to have experienced the same difficulties and frustrations with police roadblocks that were experienced in other areas.<sup>187</sup> This may be because the Redesdale fire burned largely in open country and was under control within hours rather than days or weeks. The fact that there was no loss of life also meant that the Coroner had no need to restrict access to the area.

## 10 COMMUNICATIONS

- 10.1 Mr Brittain experienced a number of difficulties with communications systems during the fire fight on 7 February 2009:
- (a) Radio communications between Redesdale divisional command and the fire ground were poor. At times Mr Brittain was unable to make contact with sector commanders and it was necessary to bring them into the operations point at Redesdale for briefings. He understood that the CFA's radio coverage in the area of the fire was 'ordinary' under normal conditions due to its topography, but believed that the difficulties on 7 February 2009 were made worse by heat and smoke<sup>188</sup>

<sup>184</sup> Exhibit 473 – Statement of Brundell (WIT.3010.006.0215) [14], [21]

<sup>185</sup> Exhibit 473 – Statement of Brundell (WIT.3010.006.0215) [21]–[22]

<sup>186</sup> Exhibit 439 – Statement of Brittain (WIT.3004.020.0251) [74]

<sup>187</sup> Exhibit 444 – Statement of Elder (WIT.114.001.0001\_R) [56]; Exhibit 459 – Statement of Siddle (WIT.115.001.0001\_R) [21]; Exhibit 462 – Pastoria RFB De–Briefing Report Redesdale Fire 7th February 2009 (CFA.001.011.0043) at 0046; Redesdale Fire Debrief – Kyneton Fire Station (CFA.001.011.0033) at 0034

<sup>188</sup> Exhibit 439 – Statement of Brittain (WIT.3004.020.0251) [60]; Brittain T9980:25–T9981:1, T9981:13–T9981:20

- (b) Similar problems were experienced with mobile telephone communications in the area, which were intermittent and at times non-existent.<sup>189</sup>  
*Most times using their mobile phone, it depended on which way you stuck your tongue out, to the left or to the right, whether the phone was going to work or not.*
- (c) Communications with ground observers were hampered by intermittent radio and mobile telephone contact, and most particularly by their inability to transmit information electronically using the Next G cards on their laptops<sup>190</sup>
- (d) Communications between the operations point and the Epsom ICC were also difficult. The only reliable form of communication was through radio communication through the MCV. Electronic transmission of information was not possible and at one point a member of the IMT had to drive from the Epsom ICC to the operations point at Redesdale to deliver maps.<sup>191</sup>
- 10.2 Debriefs conducted with volunteers after the fire also highlighted the existence of radio black spots which hampered communications on the fire ground.<sup>192</sup>
- 10.3 Before the Redesdale fire started, Mr Cutting had identified a problem with the Viper system, through which the Bendigo RECC could send non-emergency and administrative pager messages. A pager message sent by him at 13:14 on 7 February 2009, containing a weather update, was not delivered within the usual time. On checking the Viper system, he found a very large backlog of messages, including strike team activations and weather messages. The message he sent at 13:14 was not received until around 01:00 on 8 February 2009. While the alert or emergency pager system continued to work well, the RECC could only send pager messages through the Viper system. Having identified the delay in delivering non-emergency pager messages, Mr Cutting decided to use the Spectrum telephone system to dispatch strike teams, rather than pagers.<sup>193</sup> While the use of this fallback system did enable the activation of strike teams for the Redesdale fire, the inability to use the pager system meant that brigade members were unaware of which tankers had been dispatched.<sup>194</sup>
- 10.4 Members of Victoria Police involved in responding to the Redesdale fire encountered their own difficulties with radio communications. Although they appear to have had better radio reception than the CFA, their communications were hampered by the high volume of radio traffic directed through Bendigo D24. Detective Sergeant Brundell explained the problem in his statement.<sup>195</sup>

<sup>189</sup> Brittain T9981:9–T9981:12

<sup>190</sup> Exhibit 439 – Statement of Brittain (WIT.3004.020.0251) [62]; Brittain T9981:3–T9981:9

<sup>191</sup> Exhibit 439 – Statement of Brittain (WIT.3004.020.0251) [63]–[64]; Brittain T9981:21–T9982:2

<sup>192</sup> Exhibit 462 – Pastoria RFB De–Briefing Report Redesdale Fire 7th February 2009 (CFA.001.011.0043) at 0044; Redesdale Fire Debrief – Kyneton Fire Station (CFA.001.011.0033) at 0034

<sup>193</sup> Exhibit 460 – Statement of Cutting (WIT.3004.020.0001) [30], [85]; Cutting T10319:13–T10321:27; Rogasch T10253:9–T10254:3

<sup>194</sup> Exhibit 462 – Pastoria RFB De–Briefing Report Redesdale Fire 7th February 2009 (CFA.001.011.0043) at 0045

<sup>195</sup> Exhibit 473 – Statement of Brundell (WIT.3010.006.0215) [17]



*D24 is an extremely effective way of communicating with police units because all parties are simultaneously able to receive fire updates and listen to operational instructions. Throughout the afternoon it became more difficult to communicate with units in the field through D24 because of the high level of radio traffic being transmitted from police attending to the Bendigo fire. I was aware that the fire was threatening residential areas in contrast to the Redesdale fire which was burning through mainly pasture and farm land. Priority was being given to transmissions concerning the Bendigo fire which was dominating the radio traffic, making it almost impossible to communicate with my units via the radio. I recall that I had requested that Bendigo D24 split the channels to allow for communications concerning the Redesdale fire to be put through. This request was unable to be actioned by Bendigo D24 on the basis that there were not enough resources to satisfy the high volume of police communications that were coming through.*

- 10.5 This issue was also highlighted in debriefs attended by members of Victoria Police in relation to the Redesdale fire,<sup>196</sup> and by Superintendent Bull in his evidence to the Commission.<sup>197</sup>

## **11 PROPOSED KEY FINDINGS**

- 11.1 The Commission should make the following key findings.
- 11.2 The cause of ignition of the Redesdale fire has been investigated but not determined. Possible sources of ignition that have not been excluded are:
- (a) ignition by a spark or hot exhaust system
  - (b) deliberate ignition
  - (c) ignition by farm operations
  - (d) ignition by a carelessly discarded cigarette butt.

While these possible causes could not be excluded, there is no evidence that any of these sources ignited the fire.

- 11.3 The Redesdale IMT gathered information about the Redesdale fire thoroughly and efficiently during the afternoon of 7 February 2009. As this information came in to the ICC it was shared with IMT personnel.
- 11.4 The way in which information was gathered and shared by the IMT at the Epsom ICC enabled it to assess which communities were at risk, to prepare and distribute timely and informative warnings to those communities, and to put in place appropriate road closures.
- 11.5 Good information gathering and sharing by the IMT also enabled it to work out the strategy adopted in fighting the fire, which was to make a concentrated effort to

<sup>196</sup> Exhibit 454 – Statement of Bull, Attachment 12 (WIT.3010.009.0129); Attachment 13 (WIT.3010.009.0134) at 0137

<sup>197</sup> Exhibit 454 – Statement of Bull (WIT.3010.009.0001) [38]–[40]; Bull T10175:12–T10176:28

secure the north eastern flank of the fire before the impending wind change, to protect the communities of Redesdale, Mia Mia and Heathcote further to the northeast. This strategy was finalised within an hour of the Epsom ICC assuming control of the incident. It was implemented in the two hours between then and the wind change, and was effective.

- 11.6 A red flag warning was issued at 17:30 and transmitted to all stations on the fire ground, with advice that a strong south west wind change was forecast to occur between 18:30 and 19:00.
- 11.7 The effective management of the Redesdale fire by the Epsom ICC is testament to the importance of good planning leading up to a day of extreme fire danger, in particular prepositioning properly qualified and experienced staff in an ICC. It also highlights the value of focussing on gathering and sharing information within the IMT, within the fire agencies and with the public.
- 11.8 The response to the Redesdale fire by fire agencies was hampered by a number of communication difficulties. Radio communications between Redesdale divisional command and the fire ground were poor, probably due to a combination of radio black spots and the heat and smoke of the day. Mobile telephone communications were intermittent and ground observers were unable to transmit information electronically via broadband internet connection.
- 11.9 Members of the Victoria Police responding to the Redesdale fire also encountered difficulties with radio communications due to the high volume of radio traffic directed through Bendigo D24.

## BENDIGO FIRE

### 12 OVERVIEW

- 12.1 At about 16:20 on 7 February 2009 a fire started just to the south of Bracewell Street in Maiden Gully, on the north western outskirts of Bendigo, about 8 kilometres from Bendigo's central business district.<sup>198</sup> The fire has been referred to variously as the Bracewell Street fire, the Maiden Gully fire and the Bendigo fire. In these submissions it will be referred to as the Bendigo fire.
- 12.2 The Bendigo fire burned through gently rolling ground in the western suburbs of Bendigo.<sup>199</sup> In this part of Bendigo numerous former gold diggings, now public open space, are interspersed between suburban blocks.<sup>200</sup> The fire burned for about 5.5 kilometres to the south east, before the wind change at about 18:30 pushed the fire to the north east, further into suburban Bendigo. The final size of the fire was 354 hectares, of which 179 hectares – about half – was public land.<sup>201</sup>
- 12.3 Spot fires were a troublesome feature of the Bendigo fire. Shortly after ignition the fire was already spotting 200 metres downwind, and as the fire progressed spot fires were reported several kilometres to the south east of the main fire.<sup>202</sup> There were probably dozens of spot fires ahead of the fire front, with a hard-running crown fire driven by a strong wind, throwing embers across tinder dry open spaces and backyards in Bendigo's western suburbs.<sup>203</sup>

*Some people have described it like flicking a paintbrush full of red paint across the landscape and fire just appearing.*

Burnt material from the fire was located on One Tree Hill five kilometres south of the fire area the next morning.<sup>204</sup>

- 12.4 The fire spread initially to the south east, along a creek line. It rapidly built into an intense and fast moving fire, crowning in trees less than 20 metres from the area of origin.<sup>205</sup> Within 35 to 40 minutes the fire was approaching Maiden Gully Road near Bonazza Road. When the fire crossed Maiden Gully Road near Albert Street it was so intense that it melted the bitumen.<sup>206</sup> By this time there were already at least three

<sup>198</sup> Gilmore T10130:7–T10130:12

<sup>199</sup> Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Maiden Gully Fire on 7 February 2009 (BOM.901.0096) at 0104

<sup>200</sup> MacGowan T10471:21–T10471:30

<sup>201</sup> Gilmore T10143:23–T10143:26

<sup>202</sup> Gilmore T10131:4–T10131:9, T10134:17–T10134:25, T10136:11–T10136:18, T10137:12–T10137:29

<sup>203</sup> Gilmore T10137:24–T10137:29

<sup>204</sup> Gilmore T10137:30–T10138:5

<sup>205</sup> Gilmore T10130:27–T10131:4

<sup>206</sup> Gilmore T10131:29–T10131:31; T10132:7–T10132:9; Exhibit 458 – Statement of Gilmore, Annexure 8 (WIT.3004.019.0147) at 0160

spot fires about 2 kilometres to the south east of the main fire.<sup>207</sup>

- 12.5 The fire continued to move to the south east, with high intensity crowning occurring in small patches of forest both sides of Albert Street.<sup>208</sup> The fire's initial south eastern run stopped at the edge of the Dai Gum San diggings, an area of forested crown land in the area between Pascoe Street and Taylor Street, where a fuel reduction burn had been conducted the previous spring. This restricted the width of the fire front moving into suburban Bendigo by about 40 per cent, and significantly lessened the impact of the fire.<sup>209</sup>
- 12.6 By 17:30 the crown fire in the forest between Albert Street and Pascoe Street caused spotting, which carried the fire over some areas of low fuel into grasslands and backyards in the areas of Daniel Street, Walker Street and Cunneen Street.<sup>210</sup> It was at around this time that Kevin 'Mick' Kane, the only person to lose his life in the Bendigo fire, was overcome by flames outside his home in Daniel Street, Long Gully.<sup>211</sup>
- 12.7 Crowning in the area between Albert Street and Keenes Road carried the fire into the Watkins Street and Happy Valley Road areas. Intense crowning near Derwent Gully carried the fire a significant distance, with spot fires occurring several kilometres downwind. These spot fires included one which occurred near the intersection of Lily Street and Chum Streets and threatened Fortuna Villa and St John of God Hospital.<sup>212</sup>
- 12.8 As the fire progressed further to the south east it burned through an area in which fuel reduction burning had taken place in 2006. The reduction in fuel lessened the intensity of the fire as it travelled up hill, reducing spotting downwind from that area.<sup>213</sup>
- 12.9 At around 18:00 embers were being extinguished by landholders in Breen Street, several kilometres south of the main fire. Another spot fire in Lilac Street was discovered by residents and extinguished at about this time.<sup>214</sup>
- 12.10 By 18:30 the fire was 5.5 kilometres long and had almost reached Spotlight on the Calder Highway, between Happy Valley Road and Dare Street.. The head of the fire was only two kilometres from the central business district of Bendigo, with a spot fire as close as three blocks from the Bendigo police station. The wind, which had

<sup>207</sup> Gilmore T10131:31–T10132:12; Exhibit 458 – Statement of Gilmore, Annexure 8 (WIT.3004.019.0147) at 0157

<sup>208</sup> Gilmore T10132:13–T10132:15

<sup>209</sup> Gilmore T10132:15–T10133:15; Exhibit 458 – Statement of Gilmore, Annexure 8 (WIT.3004.019.0147) at 0163–0166

<sup>210</sup> Gilmore T10133:31–T10134:4

<sup>211</sup> Exhibit 34 – Statement of Kane (WIT.017.001.0001\_R); Kane T1040:6–T1057:10; Gilmore T10134:4–T10134:5

<sup>212</sup> Gilmore T10134:6–T10134:8, T10134:17–T10135:3

<sup>213</sup> Gilmore T10135:17–T10136:10

<sup>214</sup> Gilmore T10136:11–T10136:13, T10137:12–T10137:20

been tending from north west to west, swung to the south west at about 18:30.<sup>215</sup>

- 12.11 After the wind change, the fire was pushed initially to the east and then to the north east.<sup>216</sup> It made significant runs into the back of homes along Eaglehawk Road, and threatened homes along Upper California Gully Road. Spot fires occurred after the wind change on the eastern side of Eaglehawk Road and Upper California Gully Road, and north of the Eaglehawk tip.<sup>217</sup> Once again the fuel reduction that had taken place in the area between Pascoe Street and Taylor Street restricted the fire's progress, stopping about 1.5 kilometres or about 25% of the new fire front as it moved to the north east.<sup>218</sup> The Eaglehawk tip between Bracewell Street and Upper California Gully Road also arrested the progress of the fire after the wind change, reducing its impact.<sup>219</sup>
- 12.12 By 20:00 hours the wind had dropped and was blowing from the south, and the fire behaviour moderated. The fire was declared contained at 21:52 on 7 February 2009, and was declared safe at 03:00 the following Monday.<sup>220</sup>
- 12.13 There were 61 houses and 125 sheds damaged or destroyed by the Bendigo fire. The majority of the property damage – 59 houses and 109 sheds – occurred during the initial south east run of the fire. Only two houses and 16 sheds were lost after the wind change. As has already been mentioned, one life was lost in this fire.<sup>221</sup>

## 13 CAUSE

- 13.1 Police investigating the Bendigo fire believe the cause of the fire to be of a suspicious nature.<sup>222</sup> The police investigation is ongoing.<sup>223</sup> Consistent with the approach taken in relation to other fires of suspicious origin, these submissions do not address the cause of the Bendigo fire.

## 14 WEATHER

- 14.1 The Bureau of Meteorology (BOM) forecast for Bendigo for Saturday 7 February 2009, issued at 16:34 on 6 February 2009, was for:<sup>224</sup>

*A sunny day. Raised dust during the evening. Winds north to northeasterly averaging up to 35 km/h tending cooler west to southwesterly 40 to 50 km/h by early evening.*

<sup>215</sup> Gilmore T10140:1–T10140:12

<sup>216</sup> Gilmore T10140:5–T10140:7

<sup>217</sup> Gilmore T10140:20–T10140:29

<sup>218</sup> Gilmore T10140:30–T10141:15

<sup>219</sup> Gilmore T10141:25–T10141:31

<sup>220</sup> Gilmore T10143:4–T10143:9

<sup>221</sup> Gilmore T10138:6–T10138:9, T10140:23–T10140:25, T10143:21–T10143:23

<sup>222</sup> Exhibit 214 – Statement of Hollowood (WIT.3010.001.0338) [64]

<sup>223</sup> Exhibit 214 – Statement of Hollowood (WIT.3010.001.0338) [64]

<sup>224</sup> Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Maiden Gully Fire on 7 February 2009 (BOM.901.0096) at 0125

*Precis: Windy and dust Min 25 Max 44*

The Northern Country District forecast issued at around the same time was to the same effect.<sup>225</sup> Both forecasts included a fire weather warning and advice that Saturday 7 February 2009 had been declared a day of Total Fire Ban.<sup>226</sup>

- 14.2 Updated forecasts were issued early on 7 February 2009, at 05:41 for Bendigo and at 05:48 for the Northern Country District.<sup>227</sup> Both forecasts repeated the earlier fire weather warning and the advice of a Total Fire Ban, with the maximum fire danger forecast to be extreme. The forecast for the rest of the day for Bendigo was for a windy day with a late cooler change and a maximum temperature of 44°C.<sup>228</sup>
- 14.3 The BOM issued Fire Weather Forecasts for Victoria at 16:45 on 6 February, and at 06:30 on 7 February 2009.<sup>229</sup> For Bendigo Airport, both forecasts were for a maximum forest fire danger index (FFDI) of 142 and a grass fire danger index (GFDI) of 186, with a maximum temperature of 44°C, relative humidity of 6%, and north to north westerly winds of up to 50 km/h. A south westerly wind change of up to 50 km/h was forecast for between 17:00 and 21:00.
- 14.4 The observations from the Automatic Weather Station (AWS) at Bendigo Airport are very representative of the actual weather conditions in the area of the Bendigo fire during the afternoon and evening of 7 February 2009. The Bendigo Airport AWS is about seven kilometres to the east of the fire ground.<sup>230</sup>
- 14.5 At 09:00 on Saturday 7 February 2009 the temperature at Bendigo Airport was 30.2°C and the relative humidity was 30%.<sup>231</sup> The wind was from the north northeast at 5 to 10 km/h.<sup>232</sup> The wind speed increased in the course of the morning, and by noon, the wind had become northerly and had increased to 35 km/h. The temperature at Bendigo Airport was 42°C and relative humidity was 9%.<sup>233</sup>
- 14.6 The wind moved around to the north northwest between noon and 15:00 and

<sup>225</sup> Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Maiden Gully Fire on 7 February 2009 (BOM.901.0096) at 0119

<sup>226</sup> Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Maiden Gully Fire on 7 February 2009 (BOM.901.0096) at 0119, 0125

<sup>227</sup> Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Maiden Gully Fire on 7 February 2009 (BOM.901.0096) at 0120–0122, 0126–0127

<sup>228</sup> Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Maiden Gully Fire on 7 February 2009 (BOM.901.0096) at 0126

<sup>229</sup> Exhibit 22 – Statement of Williams, Annexure 1 (WIT.013.001.0012) at 0194–0195, 0210–0211

<sup>230</sup> Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Maiden Gully Fire on 7 February 2009 (BOM.901.0096) at 0100 (Figure 1) and 0104

<sup>231</sup> Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Maiden Gully Fire on 7 February 2009 (BOM.901.0096) at 0109

<sup>232</sup> Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Maiden Gully Fire on 7 February 2009 (BOM.901.0096) at 0104–0105, 0109

<sup>233</sup> Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Maiden Gully Fire on 7 February 2009 (BOM.901.0096) at 0105, 0109

increased in speed to 35 to 40 km/h.<sup>234</sup> At 16:00, just before the fire started, the temperature peaked at 44.9°C and relative humidity was 7%.<sup>235</sup> These conditions endured until the arrival of the south west wind change.<sup>236</sup>

- 14.7 The wind change passed through Bendigo Airport at 18:45. The BOM estimates that the change moved through the fire ground about 10 minutes before it reached Bendigo Airport, so that the fire was affected by the wind change from 18:35.<sup>237</sup>
- 14.8 In the 30 minutes to 19:01, the temperature at Bendigo Airport fell from 43.5°C to 34.4°C and relative humidity rose from 8% to 25%.<sup>238</sup> The winds following the change were from the south west at 35 to 40 km/h for about 15 to 20 minutes, easing to south south west at 15 km/h by 21:00.<sup>239</sup> By this time the temperature had fallen to 31.6°C and relative humidity had increased to 30%.<sup>240</sup> At 05:01 the following morning the temperature at Bendigo Airport was 23.2°C and relative humidity was 59%.<sup>241</sup>
- 14.9 No lightning strikes were recorded over the fire ground, although they were possible, particularly at the time of the wind change.<sup>242</sup> Similarly, while no rainfall was recorded in the 24 hours to 05:00 on 8 February 2009, the BOM noted that some very light falls may have occurred at those times when there was a chance of lightning.<sup>243</sup> Indeed, Sergeant Craig Gaffee reported feeling a couple of drops of rain at about the time the wind changed.<sup>244</sup>

## 15 DETECTION

- 15.1 Kirsty Tinker-Casson lives in Bracewell Street, Long Gully. She was at home on the afternoon of 7 February 2009. She told police:<sup>245</sup>

*I was home alone at this stage watching TV and doing housework. At approximately 4.20 pm I walked past the double sliding doors in the dining room next to the kitchen. I looked out the doors and I saw some flames coming from the edge of the creek area on our side of the creek. ... At this stage flames were about a metre to a metre and half high and were confined to the grass. I am not sure whether the flames were actually in*

<sup>234</sup> Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Maiden Gully Fire on 7 February 2009 (BOM.901.0096) at 0105, 0109

<sup>235</sup> Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Maiden Gully Fire on 7 February 2009 (BOM.901.0096) at 0109

<sup>236</sup> Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Maiden Gully Fire on 7 February 2009 (BOM.901.0096) at 0106, 0109

<sup>237</sup> Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Maiden Gully Fire on 7 February 2009 (BOM.901.0096) at 0106

<sup>238</sup> Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Maiden Gully Fire on 7 February 2009 (BOM.901.0096) at 0109

<sup>239</sup> Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Maiden Gully Fire on 7 February 2009 (BOM.901.0096) at 0106

<sup>240</sup> Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Maiden Gully Fire on 7 February 2009 (BOM.901.0096) at 0109

<sup>241</sup> Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Maiden Gully Fire on 7 February 2009 (BOM.901.0096) at 0110

<sup>242</sup> Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Maiden Gully Fire on 7 February 2009 (BOM.901.0096) at 0106

<sup>243</sup> Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Maiden Gully Fire on 7 February 2009 (BOM.901.0096) at 0108

<sup>244</sup> Gaffee T10343:3–T10343:6

<sup>245</sup> Exhibit 462 – Statement of Tinker–Casson (SUMM.044.002.3976\_R)

*the creek or alongside the creek. The fire did not look very big at all when I first saw it. It was only a few feet in length.*

She tried to ring 000, without success at first. By the time she did get through the fire had taken off and was racing along the creek.<sup>246</sup>

- 15.2 While Ms Tinker-Casson was trying to ring 000, Lyndon Gray was driving toward his home in Golf Links Road, Maiden Gully. He noticed a plume of black smoke coming from Bracewell Street and drove down to investigate. He also tried to ring 000 at 16:30 but was put on hold. He knocked on Ms Tinker-Casson's door to see if she was alright and, on learning that she could not get through to 000, he hung up and began hosing down her fence. He told police that the first CFA tanker arrived about 10 to 15 minutes after he had first arrived.<sup>247</sup> By that time the wind had picked up:<sup>248</sup>

*[T]he fire then took off up the creek and into the back paddock. The creek to the south forks off about 50–60 metres from the road and the fire started travelling further into the paddock area. The fire then hit the trees further in and it just exploded once it got into the tree canopy. I saw what I can only describe as fire balls coming out of the tree area and they were starting spot fires once they dropped into the paddock.*

- 15.3 Numerous other residents of the area and passersby noticed the fire and tried to call 000.<sup>249</sup> Many of them reported difficulty in getting through. At least one of these people, Michelle Walker, drove to the Eaglehawk fire station to report the fire.<sup>250</sup>
- 15.4 Eric Smith, the captain of the Eaglehawk CFA brigade, was at the station at around 16:30 when two separate cars arrived. The drivers informed the firefighters at the station that there was a fire in Bracewell Street, Maiden Gully and that the fire, when they had last seen it, was 'going pretty well'. The Eaglehawk pumper turned out immediately, and Mr Smith notified VicFire of the fire as the pumper departed. They were already well on the way to Bracewell Street at 16:35 when they received the first pager message to respond. The Eaglehawk pumper was the first appliance to reach the fire, at around 16:40.<sup>251</sup>

## 16 INCIDENT MANAGEMENT

- 16.1 The CFA was the control agency for the Bendigo fire. As the fire started in and burned through suburban Bendigo, there was no doubt that the CFA was the appropriate control agency. The CFA appears to have assumed control without any need for discussion with DSE.

<sup>246</sup> Exhibit 462 – Statement of Tinker-Casson (SUMM.044.002.3976\_R) at 3976\_R–3977\_R

<sup>247</sup> Exhibit 462 – Statement of Gray (SUMM.044.002.4041) at 4041–4042

<sup>248</sup> Exhibit 462 – Statement of Gray (SUMM.044.002.4041) at 4042

<sup>249</sup> Exhibit 462 – Statement of Walker (SUMM.044.002.3788\_R); Statement of Boyd (SUMM.044.002.0287); Statement of Cardamone (SUMM.044.002.0393\_R); Statement of Frigerio (SUMM.044.002.1418\_R);

Statement of Clarke (SUMM.044.002.0405); Statement of Caldwell (SUMM.044.002.3361)

<sup>250</sup> Exhibit 462 – Statement of Walker (SUMM.044.002.3788\_R) at 3789\_R

<sup>251</sup> Exhibit 456 – Statement of Smith (WIT.3004.020.0219) [15]–[19]; Smith T10229:19–T10230:16



- 16.2 The preparations undertaken within CFA Region 2 in the days before 7 February 2009 have been described in the submissions about the Redesdale fire.<sup>252</sup> These preparations included setting up the Level 3 Incident Control Centre (ICC) at Epsom for a ‘hot start’.
- 16.3 By the time the Bendigo fire started, however, the Epsom ICC was already fully engaged in responding to the Redesdale fire and the Operations Manager for CFA Region 2, John Deering, was the Incident Controller for the Redesdale fire.<sup>253</sup> John Cutting was the Regional Duty Officer for CFA Region 2 and the manager of the Bendigo Regional Emergency Coordination Centre (RECC) on 7 February 2009.<sup>254</sup> Not long after becoming aware of the fire at Bracewell Street, Mr Cutting spoke with Mr Deering by telephone to find out if he had the capacity to manage a second fire from the Epsom ICC. Mr Deering’s response was to the effect that the Epsom ICC was already operating at capacity and could not manage a complex new fire as well as the Redesdale fire.<sup>255</sup>
- 16.4 The next option available to Mr Cutting was the Level 2 ICC at the headquarters of the CFA’s Bendigo and Fortuna Groups at Adam Street in Bendigo.<sup>256</sup> The facility was staffed in preparation for the day as a Group co-ordination centre and Peter Rogasch, Group Officer of the Fortuna Group, had been there since morning.<sup>257</sup> Mr Rogasch described the state of preparedness at Adam Street:<sup>258</sup>

*On 7 February 2009, I started at the Adam Street Group Headquarters at 8 am. The facility was fully manned by 9 am on 7 February, with around 13 people in the facility. At that point no one had official titles but we all carried out specific roles. I was coordinating the facility. We did not believe we would be handed anything bigger than a Level 2 incident, on the day, so our preparations reflected that. The personnel in the facility were mainly Fortuna Group and Bendigo Group personnel. There was also some support people and communications people present. There was no Information Unit at the facility at this stage.*

Mr Cutting telephoned Mr Rogasch at about 16:45 and told him that the Adam Street ICC was to manage the Bendigo fire, and that Mr Rogasch was to be the Incident Controller.<sup>259</sup>

- 16.5 The Incident Management Team (IMT) that was then assembled at the Adam Street ICC to assist Mr Rogasch as Incident Controller comprised:<sup>260</sup>

<sup>252</sup> Redesdale Fire – Submissions of Counsel Assisting [5.3]–[5.5] above

<sup>253</sup> Exhibit 452 – Statement of Deering (WIT.3004.019.0192) [40]

<sup>254</sup> Exhibit 460 – Statement of Cutting (WIT.3004.020.0001) [2]–[5], [11]

<sup>255</sup> Exhibit 460 – Statement of Cutting (WIT.3004.020.0001) [56]; Cutting T10323:14–T10323:29; Deering T10162:30–T10163:8

<sup>256</sup> Cutting T10323:30–T10324:8

<sup>257</sup> Exhibit 457 – Statement of Rogasch (WIT.3004.019.0362) [12]–[13]; Rogasch T10245:8–T10245:29

<sup>258</sup> Exhibit 457 – Statement of Rogasch (WIT.3004.019.0362) [13]

<sup>259</sup> Exhibit 460 – Statement of Cutting (WIT.3004.020.0001) [56]; Cutting T10324:9–T10324:12; Exhibit 457 – Statement of Rogasch (WIT.3004.019.0362) [17]; Rogasch T10247:17–T10247:26

<sup>260</sup> Exhibit 457 – Statement of Rogasch (WIT.3004.019.0362) [18]

- (a) Noel Honeychurch and Mike Rogers in the Operations Unit
- (b) John Wells as Planning Officer
- (c) Graham Etherton as Logistics Officer.

Initially, there was no-one available to act as Information Officer.<sup>261</sup>

- 16.6 Mr Rogasch is an experienced firefighter, having spent over 26 years as a volunteer in various roles, most recently as Group Officer. He had been mentored as a Level 3 Planning Officer, and had acted as a deputy Planning Officer and a deputy Operations Officer at level 3 fires. However, as at 7 February 2009 he had no qualifications or experience as an Incident Controller.<sup>262</sup> The qualifications and experience of the other members of the initial IMT for the Bendigo fire are not known.
- 16.7 The former CFA Chief Officer Trevor Roche was also present at the Adam Street ICC and assisted Mr Rogasch and, later that evening, the Operations Unit.<sup>263</sup> Mr Roche is an endorsed Level 3 Incident Controller<sup>264</sup> and, as a former Chief Officer, was a more obvious choice as Incident Controller than Mr Rogasch. However, for reasons that were not explained to the Commission, his role was limited to mentoring Mr Rogasch.<sup>265</sup>
- 16.8 From the beginning the Adam Street ICC was hampered in its efforts to manage the Bendigo fire by poor radio and telephone communications. Mr Rogasch described the situation in the initial stages:<sup>266</sup>

*There was very limited information flow to us at the Adam Street ICC. We heard people talking on the radios when we were monitoring them but we were unable to make radio contact with the Captain of the Eaglehawk fire brigade, Eric Smith, who was the first Officer on scene. We had to revert to mobile phone communications but I would estimate that only one in ten phone calls got through to Eric Smith. We were therefore struggling to contact the fire ground crews. I recall asking the Operations Unit to continue to try the phone and radio.*

The Adam Street ICC was unable to make radio contact with the crews on the fire ground using the CFA Regional channel, the trunking system, or fire ground channels.<sup>267</sup> Repeated attempts to make contact by telephone, both landline and mobile, had only a 10% success rate.<sup>268</sup>

<sup>261</sup> Exhibit 457 – Statement of Rogasch (WIT.3004.019.0362) [13]

<sup>262</sup> Exhibit 457 – Statement of Rogasch (WIT.3004.019.0362) [2]–[3], Annexure 1 (WIT.3004.019.0372), Annexure 2 (WIT.3004.019.0375), Rogasch T10244:7–T10244:20

<sup>263</sup> Exhibit 457 – Statement of Rogasch (WIT.3004.019.0362) [18]

<sup>264</sup> Exhibit 472 – Statement of Wassing (WIT.3004.020.0150) [17]

<sup>265</sup> Exhibit 472 – Statement of Wassing (WIT.3004.020.0150) [17]

<sup>266</sup> Exhibit 457 – Statement of Rogasch (WIT.3004.019.0362) [19]; Rogasch T10258:11–T10258:23; see also Rogasch T10248:25–T10250:1

<sup>267</sup> Rogasch T10249:13–T10249:20

<sup>268</sup> Rogasch T10249:7–T10249:12

- 16.9 In addition, the Adam Street ICC had no access to the CFA's Incident Management System (IMS) from either of the two computers at the Adam Street facility. The Bendigo IMT had no access to information on the IMS and could not enter information into it.<sup>269</sup>
- 16.10 The facilities at the Adam Street ICC can fairly be described as rudimentary. They were certainly inadequate for a Level 3 incident control centre. Mr Rogasch told the Commission that they were limited by the physical size of the building, their limited access to the CFA network and their inability to print in anything other than black and white on A4 paper.<sup>270</sup> Maps had to be delivered from the Epsom ICC, because the full range of maps required was not available at the Adam Street ICC.<sup>271</sup> Many DSE staff who were sent to the Adam Street ICC brought their own computers.<sup>272</sup> The Information Officer, when he arrived, had to struggle with an unfamiliar and unresponsive email system.<sup>273</sup>
- 16.11 Given these limitations in the staffing of the initial IMT, in communications and in the facilities available, it is unsurprising that no spot fire weather forecast was requested by the Adam Street ICC until 21:00<sup>274</sup> and that no red flag warning was issued to the fire ground in advance of the wind change.<sup>275</sup>
- 16.12 As first officer on the scene, Mr Smith had assumed the role of Incident Controller and had established Bracewell Street control.<sup>276</sup> At about 17:14 he made contact with Greg Stead on Bendigo Pumper 1, and together they sectorised the fire into a north sector and a south sector. Mr Smith continued as sector commander of the north sector and Mr Stead became the sector commander for south sector.<sup>277</sup>
- 16.13 No-one from the Adam Street ICC was able to make contact with Mr Smith on the fire ground until 18:30, nearly two hours after he had first arrived at the point of origin.<sup>278</sup> Until then he had acted as the Incident Controller with no knowledge of the IMT that had been established from the Adam Street ICC. Even after contact was established he could not recall a formal handover of control to Mr Rogasch.<sup>279</sup>
- 16.14 Jeff Wilkie, who was sent from the Epsom ICC to co-ordinate the DSE resources responding to the Bendigo fire, was unaware of the existence of the Adam Street ICC until 20:20. Until then he had been providing situation reports back to the Epsom

<sup>269</sup> Rogasch T10248:15–T10248:24; Exhibit 460 – Statement of Cutting (WIT.3004.020.0001) [57]

<sup>270</sup> Exhibit 457 – Statement of Rogasch (WIT.3004.019.0362) [36]–[39]; Rogasch T10257:20–T10257:30

<sup>271</sup> Exhibit 457 – Statement of Rogasch (WIT.3004.019.0362) [37]; Rogasch T10257:31–T10258:3

<sup>272</sup> Exhibit 457 – Statement of Rogasch (WIT.3004.019.0362) [36]

<sup>273</sup> Exhibit 471 – Statement of Beaton (WIT.3024.004.0190) [31]–[34]

<sup>274</sup> Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Maiden Gully Fire on 7 February 2009 (BOM.901.0096) at 0129

<sup>275</sup> Smith T10234:3–T10234:8

<sup>276</sup> Exhibit 456 – Statement of Smith (WIT.3004.020.0219) [19]; Smith T10231:16–T10231:17

<sup>277</sup> Exhibit 456 – Statement of Smith (WIT.3004.020.0219) [22]; Smith T10232:31–T10233:10

<sup>278</sup> Exhibit 457 – Statement of Rogasch (WIT.3004.019.0362) [20]; Rogasch T10249:28–T10250:1. Mr Smith

recalls that the first contact was made at around 18:10: Exhibit 456 – Statement of Smith (WIT.3004.020.0219) [27]

<sup>279</sup> Exhibit 456 – Statement of Smith (WIT.3004.020.0219) [23]; Smith T10233:11–T10233:16

ICC.<sup>280</sup>

- 16.15 Mike Wassing has been an Operations Manager in CFA Region 2 since 1997, but as at 7 February 2009 was on secondment to the Office of the Emergency Services Commissioner. He is an endorsed Level 3 Incident Controller, and has previously acted in that role. He was at home in Strathfieldsaye on 7 February 2009 and, after learning of the Redesdale fire and seeing smoke to the west of Bendigo, he went to the Bendigo RECC to offer his assistance. He arrived at the Bendigo RECC at 17:40 and quickly realised that the Adam Street ICC needed more resources. At approximately 18:00, Mr Wassing telephoned Pat O'Brien, the CFA's General Manager for the North West Area, and informed him of the Bendigo fire and discussed resources. Mr O'Brien then asked Mr Wassing to go to the Adam Street ICC to assist Mr Rogasch. He did so, arriving at 18:30.<sup>281</sup>
- 16.16 Mr O'Brien also alerted Russell Manning at the Epsom ICC of the need to send some resources to the Adam Street ICC to assist with the response to the Bendigo fire. Mr Manning, is the DSE's District Manager of Land and Fire Services for the Mallee District, and was at the Epsom ICC on 7 February 2009 assisting Andrew Matthews, the Regional Duty Officer for DSE's North West Area. Mr Manning was alerted to the significance of the Bendigo fire at about 18:30, and initiated a discussion with Mr Deering and senior DSE managers at the Epsom ICC. They decided that Mr Manning would take a number of key people with him from the Epsom ICC to the Adam Street ICC, namely Sharon Thomas (Planning), Leonie Dickens (Resources), Lissa Hayes (Management Support) and Alan Buchanan (Logistics). Peter Beaton had already been sent to the Adam Street ICC to take on the role of Information Officer, along with Amy Groch in a liaison role.<sup>282</sup>
- 16.17 Mr Manning and his team arrived at the Adam Street ICC at 19:00. Mr Manning was assigned the role of Deputy Incident Controller.<sup>283</sup>
- 16.18 Also at about 18:30 Mark Gilmore had a discussion with Mr Deering about the Bendigo fire. Mr Gilmore was then employed as an Operations Officer with CFA Region 2, and was working as Deputy Operations Officer in the Redesdale IMT at the Epsom ICC. Mr Deering told Mr Gilmore that the fire was 'ugly' and that they were losing houses. Mr Gilmore agreed to leave the Epsom ICC and go out to the field to help the field commanders. Mr Gilmore drove into Bendigo, arriving at the head of the fire near Spotlight as the wind was changing, and assumed the role of Divisional Commander.<sup>284</sup> He appears to have done this without reference to Mr Rogasch as Incident Controller, having little or no information about the IMT structure that had been put in place at the Adam Street ICC.<sup>285</sup>

<sup>280</sup> Exhibit 462 – Statement of Wilkie (SUMM.044.002.3887) at 3892

<sup>281</sup> Exhibit 472 – Statement of Wassing (WIT.3004.020.0150) [1]–[6], [9]–[14]

<sup>282</sup> Exhibit 470 – Statement of Manning (WIT.3024.004.0233) [23], [41]–[43]; Exhibit 471 – Statement of Beaton (WIT.3024.004.0190) [21]–[22]

<sup>283</sup> Exhibit 470 – Statement of Manning (WIT.3024.004.0233) [44]

<sup>284</sup> Exhibit 458 – Statement of Gilmore (WIT.3004.019.0001) [60]–[64]; Gilmore T10278:6–T10280:1, T10280:29–T10283:4, T10284:3–T10284:17

<sup>285</sup> Gilmore T10279:10–T10279:14, T10282:21–T10282:29

- 16.19 Mr Gilmore also encountered difficulties in radio communications, and was unable to make radio contact with the field commanders.<sup>286</sup> He drove around in an attempt to find the Bracewell Street control point. Eventually at 19:10 he found Mr Smith in Upper California Gully Road. Together they went to the intersection of Eaglehawk Road and Upper California Gully Road, where they established an operations point.<sup>287</sup>
- 16.20 Starting at about 19:15, Mr Gilmore held a briefing at the operations point with those who had gathered there, including Mr Smith, Leigh Stevens and Sergeant Craig Gaffee. He drew a map on the bonnet of his vehicle, formulated a strategy for containing the fire, and resectorised the fire. Mr Smith continued as sector commander of the Bracewell sector, to the north, between the Eaglehawk tip along Bracewell Street to Golf Links Road. Mr Stevens was to be the sector commander of the Gold Mines sector, in the area on the eastern side of the fire, from the tip to the Calder Highway. Mark McEwan was allocated as sector commander of the Calder sector on the western side of the fire.<sup>288</sup>
- 16.21 It was not until around 19:45 that Mr Gilmore had any contact with the Adam Street ICC.<sup>289</sup> At this time Mr Rogasch telephoned him, told him that Adam Street was operating as the ICC, that Mr Rogasch was the Incident Controller, and that Mr Gilmore should work through him.<sup>290</sup> Mr Rogasch asked Mr Gilmore to come into the Adam Street ICC to provide a briefing on the status of the fire.<sup>291</sup> Mr Gilmore arrived at the ICC at around 21:00, and gave a full briefing to the IMT shortly afterwards.
- 16.22 Mr Wassing's skill and experience as a Level 3 Incident Controller quickly became apparent. At around 19:30 he and Mr Rogasch agreed that he should take over as Incident Controller, although he did not formally assume the role until 21:30. With his presence, the arrival of a number of personnel from the Epsom ICC to take on roles in the IMT, and improved information flow from the fire ground, the Adam Street ICC became more functional. By the time of the briefing for the night shift IMT at around 21:30, Mr Wassing was able to focus on pressing matters such as liaison with the MECC, traffic management and safety issues arising from gas leaks and fallen power lines.<sup>292</sup>
- 16.23 By this time, however, the Bendigo fire was more or less under control. It was declared contained at 21:52.<sup>293</sup>

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<sup>286</sup> Exhibit 458 – Statement of Gilmore (WIT.3004.019.0001) [65]–[66]; Gilmore T10301:17–T10302:5

<sup>287</sup> Exhibit 458 – Statement of Gilmore (WIT.3004.019.0001) [66]–[68]; Gilmore T10302:6–T10303:8

<sup>288</sup> Exhibit 458 – Statement of Gilmore (WIT.3004.019.0001) [70]–[71], [82]–[83], Annexure 3 (WIT.3004.019.0043); Gilmore T10303:5–T10306:20

<sup>289</sup> Exhibit 457 – Statement of Rogasch (WIT.3004.019.0362) [26]

<sup>290</sup> Exhibit 458 – Statement of Gilmore (WIT.3004.019.0001) [74]; Gilmore T10307:28–T10308:7

<sup>291</sup> Exhibit 457 – Statement of Rogasch (WIT.3004.019.0362) [26]; Rogasch T10255:4–T10255:22;

<sup>292</sup> Exhibit 472 – Statement of Wassing (WIT.3004.020.0150) [17]–[33], in particular [26] and [30]–[31]

<sup>293</sup> Gilmore T10143:6–T10143:8

- 16.24 While the planning and prepositioning of staff at the Epsom ICC was exemplary, the management at CFA Region 2 did not plan adequately for the eventuality that more than one significant fire might break out in the region on 7 February 2009. In his SMEACS briefing to Group Officers in Region 2 on 6 February, Mr Cutting warned ‘It may be the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> fire that catches us out’.<sup>294</sup>
- 16.25 And so it proved. When the second fire did break out on the outskirts of Bendigo, the facilities and the personnel available to manage the incident were woefully inadequate. The contrast between the Adam Street ICC and the Epsom ICC, fully set up with Level 3 qualified staff in place before the outbreak of fire, was stark. At Adam Street, there was no Information Officer until Mr Beaton arrived at just after 18:00. It was nearly two hours before a Level 3 Incident Controller arrived at the Adam Street ICC. By that time, most of the damage done by the fire had already occurred. The Adam Street ICC was largely irrelevant to the response to the fire in the critical hours before and immediately after the wind change.
- 16.26 That said, it is a credit to the firefighters who responded to the Bendigo fire that they were able to establish a working incident management structure on the fire ground and deploy resources reasonably effectively. They did so in circumstances where radio communications had almost completely failed, which may explain why key personnel on the fire ground were unaware of the Adam Street ICC until so late in the day.

## 17 RESPONSE

- 17.1 On learning of the fire near Bracewell Street, Mr Cutting initially thought that with a quick and active initial response the CFA might be able to bring the fire under control. However, with the delay in members of the public being able to report the fire to 000, and the consequent delay in brigades being paged, it was 20 to 30 minutes before the first firefighters arrived.<sup>295</sup> By that time, the fire was out of control.
- 17.2 Eric Smith and the other firefighters on the Eaglehawk pumper were the first to reach the fire, at about 16:40.<sup>296</sup> As they travelled towards the fire, Mr Smith could see the growing smoke column, and made a series of requests for tankers to be despatched – starting with ‘make tankers 5’, quickly followed by ‘make tankers 10’ and then finally, as they drove into Bracewell Street, ‘make tankers 50’.<sup>297</sup> Mr Smith’s initial assessment of the fire on arrival was:<sup>298</sup>

<sup>294</sup> Exhibit 460 – Statement of Cutting (WIT.3004.020.0001) [20], Annexure 8 (WIT.3004.020.0080) at 0080

<sup>295</sup> Exhibit 460 – Statement of Cutting (WIT.3004.020.0001) [47]; Cutting T10322:16–T10323:1

<sup>296</sup> Exhibit 456 – Statement of Smith (WIT.3004.020.0219) [15]–[19]; Smith T10229:19–T10230:16

<sup>297</sup> Exhibit 456 – Statement of Smith (WIT.3004.020.0219) [18]; Smith T10230:31–T10231:9. It is possible Mr Smith asked for 15 tankers rather than 50

<sup>298</sup> Smith T10231:18–T10231:28; see also Exhibit 456 – Statement of Smith (WIT.3004.020.0219) [20]

*The fire had certainly travelled a lot further and a lot quicker than I would have expected. I was of the opinion that when we arrived at that point the fire would have been somewhere in the vicinity of Maiden Gully Road, Bonazza's Road, somewhere in that vicinity, and it was well out of control.*

- 17.3 The Eaglehawk pumper was soon joined by the Bendigo tanker and together they were able to extinguish the edge of the fire near the point of origin, to protect nearby houses.<sup>299</sup> As other tankers arrived Mr Smith directed them to work along both edges of the fire, concentrating on the eastern edge.<sup>300</sup>
- 17.4 By 17:15 half a dozen appliances had responded to the southern end of the fire, in the vicinity of Maiden Gully Road and Bonazza Road.<sup>301</sup> Mr Smith spoke with Greg Stead, on Bendigo pumper 1, and they agreed that Mr Stead would be sector commander of the south sector.<sup>302</sup> Contrary to Mr Smith's expectations, the fire jumped Maiden Gully Road at about 17:30.<sup>303</sup> It was not until much later that Mr Smith learned how far the fire had travelled.
- 17.5 Also at around 17:30 a spot fire broke out in Chum Street, caused by embers from the main fire.<sup>304</sup> This fire was of particular concern as it was close to the St John of God Hospital. It was attended by the Bendigo pumper 1 soon after ignition and was brought under control quickly, probably within about 15 minutes.<sup>305</sup>
- 17.6 DSE personnel also attended to the fire. Mr Vearing directed Jeffrey Wilkie, an Assistant Fire Management Officer with the DSE, to respond to the fire. Mr Wilkie's police statement was among those tendered to the Commission.<sup>306</sup> He arrived at Maiden Gully Road just as the fire crossed that road to the west of Albert Street. As he provided situation reports to the Epsom ICC and other areas, he was forced back by the fire:<sup>307</sup>

*At this stage, the fire was heading back towards me and kept forcing me to reverse up Maiden Gully Road. I think I moved three or four times, each time moving no more than 100 metres all within the space of about five minutes. At this time, two tankers turned up and started to attack the fire from Maiden Gully Road. As they were attempting to put out spot fires and the edge of the fire front, the flames were getting close to the fire fighters. I remember at one stage fire fighters were trying to put out flames on the North side of Maiden Gully Road, these flames were approximately 10 – 15 metres high so I directed them to concentrate their efforts elsewhere. The fire was getting very intense and forced the tankers back along Maiden Gully Road. Another tanker turned up during*

<sup>299</sup> Exhibit 456 – Statement of Smith (WIT.3004.020.0219) [20]; Smith T10232:2–T10232:10

<sup>300</sup> Exhibit 456 – Statement of Smith (WIT.3004.020.0219) [21]; Smith T10232:11–T10232:21

<sup>301</sup> Exhibit 458 – Statement of Gilmore, Annexure 8 (WIT.3004.019.0147) at 0154, 0158

<sup>302</sup> Exhibit 456 – Statement of Smith (WIT.3004.020.0219) [22]; Smith T10232:31–T10233:10

<sup>303</sup> Exhibit 456 – Statement of Smith (WIT.3004.020.0219) [26]; Smith T10234:9–T10235:4; Exhibit 458 – Statement of Gilmore, Annexure 8 (WIT.3004.019.0147) at 0161

<sup>304</sup> Gilmore T10134:17–T10134:25; Exhibit 458 – Statement of Gilmore, Annexure 8 (WIT.3004.019.0147) at 0162

<sup>305</sup> Gilmore T10135:4–T10135:7; Exhibit 458 – Statement of Gilmore, Annexure 8 (WIT.3004.019.0147) at 0162

<sup>306</sup> Exhibit 462 – Statement of Wilkie (SUMM.044.002.3887)

<sup>307</sup> Exhibit 462 – Statement of Wilkie (SUMM.044.002.3887) at 3888

*this time to help out. We kept moving back, East along Maiden Gully Road until we got to about Fowlers Road, where I stopped.*

- 17.7 After assisting a family to evacuate from Albert Street, Mr Wilkie met with a number of DSE crews, including two slip on units, near Pascoe Street. They caught up with the fire at the Victoria Hill diggings, where they stopped in a picnic area and directly attacked the fire. He directed another DSE crew who had arrived with a bobcat to cut fire breaks in grassland to the east of the Spotlight store, at the intersection of the Calder Highway (Marong Road) and Eaglehawk Road.<sup>308</sup> It was probably this DSE crew who assisted Anna MacGowan by demolishing her burning fence, saving her house in Marong Road.<sup>309</sup>
- 17.8 The fire reached the back of the Spotlight store at around 18:30. Mr Gilmore arrived on the scene shortly afterwards, as the wind change came through.<sup>310</sup> As described at paragraphs 16.19 and 16.20 above, Mr Gilmore established an operations point at the intersection of Eaglehawk Road and Upper California Gully Road, resectorised the fire and developed a strategy for the response. The strategy was to contain the fire at Upper California Gully Road, and to extinguish any spot fires that started to the east of that line.<sup>311</sup> Consistent with this strategy Mr Gilmore directed several people to work in the triangle of Upper California Gully Road, Eaglehawk Road and Victoria Street areas, and to extinguish any fires in that area.<sup>312</sup> Mr Wilkie directed DSE fire crews into that triangle to assist with the fire fight and also tasked DSE bulldozers to cut breaks along the northern flank of the fire.<sup>313</sup>
- 17.9 Air attack had not been possible before the wind change due to the high winds. By 19:22 the winds had subsided and the firebombing helicopter, Helitack 334, was directed to provide firebombing support. Robert Jarvis, the Air Attack Supervisor, gave the following account of the work by the air crew:<sup>314</sup>

*Following communications with Country Fire Authority (CFA) Operations Officer – Eric SMITH, we were instructed to provide firebombing support to ground based crews in the vicinity of the fire front at the north eastern area of the fire which was located along Upper Road/ Upper California Road, Long Gully. The priority for firebombing operations was the unprotected running edge of the fire where tanker units were not in attendance. A number of loads of foam were dropped by HT334 at the rear of the California Gully Primary School on Staley Street and active fire edge in nearby adjoining bushland to the west.*

*Once ground crews were in attendance we relocated to a remote bushland area further on the western side of the fire where active fire was burning towards remote dwellings*

<sup>308</sup> Exhibit 462 – Statement of Wilkie (SUMM.044.002.3887) at 3889–3890

<sup>309</sup> Exhibit 462 – Statement of Wilkie (SUMM.044.002.3887) at 3890; Exhibit 479 – Statement of MacGowan (WIT.113.001.0001) [22]–[23]; MacGowan T10474:17–T10474:30

<sup>310</sup> Exhibit 458 – Statement of Gilmore (WIT.3004.019.0001) [60]–[64]; Gilmore T10277:6–T10280:1, T10280:29–T10283:4, T10284:3–T10284:17

<sup>311</sup> Exhibit 458 – Statement of Gilmore (WIT.3004.019.0001) [70]–[71]; Gilmore T10306:21–T10307:22

<sup>312</sup> Exhibit 458 – Statement of Gilmore (WIT.3004.019.0001) [73]; Gilmore T10307:23–T10307:27

<sup>313</sup> Exhibit 462 – Statement of Wilkie (SUMM.044.002.3887) at 3892

<sup>314</sup> Exhibit 463 – Statement of Jarvis (VPO.001.012.0032) at 0034



*nearby between Bracewell Street and Golf Links Road. Fire bombing and reconnaissance work continued in that area until soon before last light ... Prior to landing, while in the area we were able to provide intelligence to DSE Operations Officer – Jeff WILKIE on fire activity in relation to nearby dwellings and access tracks in the vicinity of Bracewell Street and Golf Links Road. We provided directions to the fire crews to protect houses at risk of fire.*

Mr Wilkie was able to direct a tanker into the area to extinguish the remaining fire in the parkland.<sup>315</sup> Mr Smith's assessment was that the protective work done by the helicopter had been instrumental in keeping house losses in the area after the wind change to a single house.<sup>316</sup>

- 17.10 By 19:47 it appeared that the fire was contained in the area of Happy Valley Road and Marong Road (Calder Highway).<sup>317</sup> While the strategy formulated at the operations point was implemented, a staging area was established at the Schweppes Centre, with the assistance of the SES.<sup>318</sup> Mr Gilmore closed the operations point to go to the Adam Street ICC at about 20:40.<sup>319</sup>
- 17.11 The Bendigo fire was declared contained at 21:52 that night, and was declared safe at 03:00 on 9 February 2009.<sup>320</sup>
- 17.12 Mr Gilmore was asked to reflect on why it was that, in contrast to some other fires, there were minimal losses in Bendigo after the wind change:<sup>321</sup>

*I think compared to most other fires ours is much smaller. That is one of the reasons. So, we have 47 appliances working on 350 hectares and a distance of around five kilometres, with probably only a third of that fire actively running, so we are probably only talking about a kilometre and a half or two kilometres of actual progressing fire edge because of the advantages of the municipal tip and the fuel reduction burning that had been done. So I think we probably had a much different scenario to what other people that may have had scattered resources that were trying to operate on many tens of kilometres of fire and perhaps in most areas in fairly volatile types of forests also of stringybark and long distance spotting.*

It would appear that fuel reduction on the western outskirts of Bendigo, in particular the burn in the Dai Gum San diggings in Spring 2008, was critical in reducing the impact of the Bendigo fire on residential areas.

<sup>315</sup> Exhibit 462 – Statement of Wilkie (SUMM.044.002.3887) at 3892

<sup>316</sup> Smith T10325:14–T10235:31

<sup>317</sup> Exhibit 458 – Statement of Gilmore (WIT.3004.019.0001) [79]

<sup>318</sup> Exhibit 458 – Statement of Gilmore (WIT.3004.019.0001) [84]–[85]; Exhibit 472 – Statement of Wassing (WIT.3004.020.0150) [22]

<sup>319</sup> Exhibit 458 – Statement of Gilmore (WIT.3004.019.0001) [93]–[95]

<sup>320</sup> Gilmore T10143:4–T10143:9

<sup>321</sup> Gilmore T10311:18–T10312:8

## 18 EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

- 18.1 The Bendigo fire burned in the City of Greater Bendigo. Alexandra Malone, the Municipal Emergency Response Officer (MERO) for Greater Bendigo, provided the Commission with a statement outlining the Municipal Emergency Management Plan for the City of Greater Bendigo (Bendigo MEMP) and the municipal emergency response to the Bendigo fire on 7 February 2009.<sup>322</sup> The Commission also received a statement from Senior Sergeant Grant Morris, the Municipal Emergency Response Coordinator (MERC) for Greater Bendigo,<sup>323</sup> and heard evidence from Superintendent Peter Bull, the Divisional Emergency Response Co-ordinator (DERC) for Region 3, Division 3, which takes in the municipality of Greater Bendigo.<sup>324</sup>
- 18.2 The Bendigo MEMP was developed and adopted by the Municipal Emergency Management Planning Committee for Greater Bendigo, a committee comprising council representatives and local representatives of emergency response and recovery agencies, including the CFA and Victoria Police.<sup>325</sup> It was first adopted in 1997 and has been regularly revised and updated since then.<sup>326</sup> It is audited by the Victorian State Emergency Service once every three years, and most recently in December 2006 was assessed as complying with the guidelines.<sup>327</sup> The description of the municipality specifically refers to the risk of bushfire:

*Summers can be hot and dry with northerly winds which do cause concerns with bushfires which can occur in the forested areas and grass fires which can cause large crop losses with the added risk to life and property.*<sup>328</sup>

In a complementary risk assessment carried out by the City of Greater Bendigo, wildfire has been identified as one of the high risks for the municipality.<sup>329</sup>

- 18.3 The Bendigo MEMP contains a comprehensive contact directory for council and emergency response and recovery agencies. It addresses arrangements for the prevention of, response to and recovery from emergencies, as well as the possible locations of the Municipal Emergency Co-ordination Centre (MECC) and emergency relief centres. The Bendigo MEMP identifies which agency is the control agency for responding to each kind of emergency, and outlines the roles of support agencies.<sup>330</sup>
- 18.4 In relation to fire, the CFA and the DSE are identified as the control agency.<sup>331</sup> There

<sup>322</sup> Exhibit 465 – Statement of Malone (WIT.4010.001.0001), Annexure 2 (WIT.4010.001.0017)

<sup>323</sup> Exhibit 464 – Statement of Morris (WIT.3010.007.0298)

<sup>324</sup> Exhibit 454 – Statement of Bull (WIT.3010.009.0001)

<sup>325</sup> Exhibit 465 – Statement of Malone (WIT.4010.001.0001) [16]–[22]

<sup>326</sup> Exhibit 465 – Statement of Malone (WIT.4010.001.0001) [17]

<sup>327</sup> Exhibit 465 – Statement of Malone (WIT.4010.001.0001) [27], Annexure 2 (WIT.4010.001.0017) at 0033

<sup>328</sup> Exhibit 465 – Statement of Malone, Annexure 2 (WIT.4010.001.0017) at 0035

<sup>329</sup> Exhibit 465 – Statement of Malone (WIT.4010.001.0001) [23]–[24], Annexure 2 (WIT.4010.001.0017) at 0054

<sup>330</sup> Exhibit 465 – Statement of Malone (WIT.4010.001.0001) [26], Annexure 2 (WIT.4010.001.0017) at 0058–0060

<sup>331</sup> Oddly, the MFESB is also included as a possible control agency: Exhibit 465 – Statement of Malone, Annexure 2 (WIT.4010.001.0017) at 0059

is nothing more specific than this in the Bendigo MEMP about the arrangements for responding to a bushfire emergency.

- 18.5 While the support agencies for fire are not specified, the support tasks to be carried out by various agencies are. Victoria Police is specified as the primary support agency for public warnings and evacuation.<sup>332</sup> The Bendigo MEMP anticipates that warnings will be issued by the MERC, once information has been released by the control agency.<sup>333</sup> The arrangements for evacuation are as follows:<sup>334</sup>

*The Victoria Police are responsible for evacuation. The decision to evacuate rests with the control agency in conjunction with Police and available expert advice. Consideration must be given to the area which is to be evacuated, the route to be followed, the means of transport and the location to which evacuees will be asked to attend.*

*Once the decision to evacuate has been made the City of Greater Bendigo MERO should be contacted to assist in the implementation of the evacuation. The City of Greater Bendigo will provide advice regarding the most suitable Emergency Relief Centre and other resources that may be required. ... To identify special needs groups that are in the evacuation area contact should be made with the Department [of] Human Services. It is important to note that special needs facilities are required to have an evacuation plan which should include the dispersment of their clients/residents. However these facilities may require assistance with transportation which may be provided through the following: ...*

The Bendigo MEMP does not descend to the detail of identifying those locations that may require special assistance with evacuation, or arrangements for evacuating particular locations.

- 18.6 On Friday 6 February 2009 Senior Sergeant Morris rang Mr Malone to ensure he was aware of the weather forecast for the following day and to confirm that council equipment and staff were to be on standby. Mr Malone ascertained that key council staff involved in emergency response and recovery would be available if required, and placed the Council's seven water tankers and six graders on standby. A generator was procured for the MECC at the Town Hall, for use if required.<sup>335</sup>
- 18.7 At the request of Senior Sergeant Morris, Mr Malone was at the council depot arranging for water tankers and graders to be made available to crews fighting the Redesdale fire when he learned of the second fire burning near Bracewell Street at about 16:15. At about 17:00 Senior Sergeant Morris asked Mr Malone to open an emergency relief centre for residents near Bracewell Street who were evacuating. Mr Malone organised for the Eaglehawk Leisure Centre to be opened as an emergency relief centre.<sup>336</sup>

<sup>332</sup> Exhibit 465 – Statement of Malone, Annexure 2 (WIT.4010.001.0017) at 0076

<sup>333</sup> Exhibit 465 – Statement of Malone, Annexure 2 (WIT.4010.001.0017) at 0047–0049

<sup>334</sup> Exhibit 465 – Statement of Malone, Annexure 2 (WIT.4010.001.0017) at 0078–0079

<sup>335</sup> Exhibit 465 – Statement of Malone (WIT.4010.001.0001) [51]–[55]

<sup>336</sup> Exhibit 465 – Statement of Malone (WIT.4010.001.0001) [60]–[62]

- 18.8 At 17:55 Senior Sergeant Morris telephoned Mr Malone to request that he activate the MECC.<sup>337</sup> Mr Malone called the relevant council staff, two of whom were not able to respond because they were dealing with the fire themselves. Mr Malone and the Council's Chief Executive Officer, Craig Neiman, opened the MECC at the Town Hall. It was fully operational by about 18:30.
- 18.9 In the meantime Senior Sergeant Morris was alerted to the fact that the wind change would push the fire towards Eaglehawk, placing the emergency relief centre at risk. This information came from a range of sources: from Sergeant Craig Gaffee, who was managing traffic in the area of the fire; from Mr Gilmore on the fire ground; and from the relief centre itself.<sup>338</sup> Senior Sergeant Morris requested that Mr Malone relocate to the relief centre. A second emergency relief centre was opened at the Kangaroo Flat Senior Citizens Centre, the people who had gone to the Eaglehawk Leisure Centre were transferred by bus to Kanagaroo Flat, and the Eaglehawk Leisure Centre was closed.<sup>339</sup> The Red Cross registered 345 people at the Kangaroo Flat emergency relief centre on 7 and 8 February 2009, and about 100 people stayed overnight.<sup>340</sup>
- 18.10 There was a deal of unnecessary confusion about the location of the emergency relief centre in Bendigo on 7 February 2009, and poor advice to the public about where those evacuating could go. Chris Casey of Long Gully was advised by police to evacuate, but was unable to obtain advice about where to go:<sup>341</sup>

*I immediately went home and asked Marion to get together her medications and other things. I also called 000 and immediately got through to an operator. I was put through to the fire brigade and asked for advice on where to evacuate to. The response I received was to the effect that the fire brigade did not know where we should go – they were only looking after fighting the fires. I called 000 again and asked to be put through to the Police. I asked the police officer I spoke to if there was any evacuation point in Bendigo and the officer told me that he had 'no idea'.*

When interviewed on ABC Radio at 18:27, Superintendent Bull did not know the exact location of the emergency relief centre, but mentioned Long Gully hall.<sup>342</sup> The first official advice to the public about the location of an emergency relief centre was in an Urgent Threat Message issued at 19:00, which identified the Eaglehawk Leisure Centre as the emergency relief centre.<sup>343</sup> This advice was repeated in the Urgent Threat Messages issued at 19:30, 20:30 and even 21:30, although by then the

<sup>337</sup> Exhibit 464 – Statement of Morris (WIT.3010.007.0298) [27]; Exhibit 465 – Statement of Malone (WIT.4010.001.0001) [63]

<sup>338</sup> Exhibit 464 – Statement of Morris (WIT.3010.007.0298) [28]–[29]; Exhibit 461 – Statement of Gaffee (WIT.3010.006.0199) [56]

<sup>339</sup> Exhibit 464 – Statement of Morris (WIT.3010.007.0298) [29]; Exhibit 465 – Statement of Malone (WIT.4010.001.0001) [64]

<sup>340</sup> Exhibit 465 – Statement of Malone (WIT.4010.001.0001) [65]

<sup>341</sup> Exhibit 70 – Statement of Casey (WIT.035.001.0001\_R) [8]

<sup>342</sup> Exhibit 79 – Transcript – ABC Central Victoria (CFA.001.015.0073) at 0075

<sup>343</sup> Exhibit 471 – Statement of Beaton, Annexure 3 (DSE.HDD.0012.1660)

Eaglehawk relief centre had been closed.<sup>344</sup> Kangaroo Flat Senior Citizens Centre was identified as an emergency relief centre for the first time in the Urgent Threat Message issued at 21:30.<sup>345</sup>

- 18.11 This confusion might have been avoided with better communication between the Adam Street ICC and the MERC and the MERO at the MECC. Both Mr Malone and Senior Sergeant Morris commented on the lack of a CFA liaison officer at the MECC in the early hours of the Bendigo fire, which made communication with the ICC difficult and affected decision making.<sup>346</sup> This issue was also raised in the multi-agency debrief held in relation to the Bendigo fire.<sup>347</sup>
- 18.12 An inter-agency initiative that worked well was the allocation of a police member to each of the sector commanders for the Bendigo fire. This was arranged through the MECC later in the evening of 7 February 2009.<sup>348</sup> The arrangement proved mutually beneficial. The police were able to assist the sector commanders to deal with small issues before they became big problems, and their presence in the sector commanders' vehicles gave police access to very good information about the fire situation.<sup>349</sup>
- 18.13 The MECC was in operation and staffed until 17:45 on Sunday, 8 February 2009. It closed overnight and was then open during business hours from Monday 9 February until Monday 16 February 2009. The emergency relief centre at Kangaroo Flat was closed on 9 February 2009, when the Eaglehawk Senior Citizens Centre was opened as a recovery centre.<sup>350</sup>

## 19 WARNINGS

- 19.1 As has already been discussed in relation to Incident Management, there was no Information Officer at Adam Street when it became the ICC for the Bendigo fire.
- 19.2 The Information Unit at the Epsom ICC was able to issue some initial advice about the Bendigo fire, in addition to warnings about the Redesdale fire. After learning of the Bendigo fire at around 16:30, Peter Downes obtained information about the approximate location of the fire from the Bendigo RECC. He then rang two local radio stations, 3BO and ABC Bendigo 91.1FM (ABC Bendigo) and provided verbal advice that there was a fire at Bracewell Street, and that people in Maiden Gully

<sup>344</sup> Exhibit 471 – Statement of Beaton, Annexure 4 (DSE.HDD.0012.1661), Annexure 5 (DSE.HDD.0012.1662), Annexure 6 (DSE.HDD.0012.1663)

<sup>345</sup> Exhibit 471 – Statement of Beaton, Annexure 6 (DSE.HDD.0012.1663)

<sup>346</sup> Exhibit 465 – Statement of Malone (WIT.4010.001.0001) [67]; Exhibit 464 – Statement of Morris (WIT.3010.007.0298) [30]

<sup>347</sup> Exhibit 464 – Statement of Morris, Attachment 5 (WIT.3010.007.0340) at 0342

<sup>348</sup> Exhibit 465 – Statement of Malone, Attachment 6 (WIT.4010.001.0206) at 0263

<sup>349</sup> Smith T10239:17–T10240:2; Exhibit 461 – Statement of Gaffee (WIT.3010.006.0199) [62]; Gaffee T10346:4–T10346:16

<sup>350</sup> Exhibit 465 – Statement of Malone (WIT.4010.001.0001) [75]–[77]

should be alert.<sup>351</sup> An initial alert for the Bendigo fire was broadcast on ABC Bendigo at 16:52.<sup>352</sup>

19.3 An Initial Advice Awareness Message was then broadcast on ABC Bendigo at 17:10 advising listeners of a fire near Bracewell Street, Eaglehawk. The fire was described as a grass fire burning in a south easterly direction and generating a large amount of smoke. Residents in Maiden Gully were advised to put their fire plans into action. This advice was broadcast again at 17:15 and updated at 17:25.<sup>353</sup> Mr Downes believes this message was prepared and issued by Heather Shaw, who was working with him in the Information Unit at the Epsom ICC.<sup>354</sup>

19.4 An Urgent Threat Message was also prepared by the Epsom ICC and posted to the CFA website at 17:17. It said:<sup>355</sup>

*A grass fire is burning in the vicinity of Bracewell Street Eaglehawk. It is burning in a south easterly direction. Residents in the Maiden Gully area are advised to put their fire plan into action. CFA and DSE units are currently responding to this fire. The fire could be generating a large amount of smoke.*

This message was read on ABC 774 at 17:15 and was recapped at 18:00.<sup>356</sup> It was broadcast on ABC Bendigo at 17:33 and recapped at 17:46.<sup>357</sup>

19.5 Information about the Bendigo fire was broadcast on ABC 774 and ABC Bendigo in an interview with Jonathan Ridnell from ABC Bendigo at 17:48. Relaying information he had received from the CFA, Mr Ridnell told listeners that the fire started on Bracewell Street, was heading in a south easterly direction, had crossed Maiden Gully Road and was threatening to cross Sparrowhawk-Empire Road. Residents in Maiden Gully and Long Gully were advised to implement their fire plans. Mr Ridnell also spoke of a fire that had been reported in the area of Thistle Street, near the Saint John of God Hospital.<sup>358</sup> Listeners of ABC Bendigo were advised at 17:58 that the fire had crossed Sparrowhawk Road and that residents from Golden Square to Kangaroo Flat should be on alert, and the message was recapped at 18:10.<sup>359</sup>

19.6 At 18:27 ABC Bendigo broadcast an interview with Superintendent Peter Bull, who

<sup>351</sup> Exhibit 469 – Statement of Downes (WIT.3004.020.0314) [28]

<sup>352</sup> Exhibit 469 – Statement of Downes (WIT.3004.020.0314) [29]; Exhibit 144 – ABC Local Radio – Disc 1 (TEN.052.001.0001)

<sup>353</sup> Exhibit 144 – ABC Local Radio – Disc 1 (TEN.052.001.0001) Exhibit 144 – ABC Local Radio – Disc 1 (TEN.052.001.0001)

<sup>354</sup> Exhibit 469 – Statement of Downes (WIT.3004.020.0314) [29]

<sup>355</sup> Exhibit 3 – Statement of Rees, Annexure 31 (WIT.004.001.0509) at 0565

<sup>356</sup> Exhibit 7 – Transcript, 774 ABC Radio Broadcast – Saturday, 7 February 2009 7am – Midnight (SUMM.001.002.0001) at 338:15 and 368:1

<sup>357</sup> Exhibit 144 – ABC Local Radio – Disc 1 (TEN.052.001.0001) Exhibit 144 – ABC Local Radio – Disc 1 (TEN.052.001.0001)

<sup>358</sup> Exhibit 7 – Transcript, 774 ABC Radio Broadcast – Saturday, 7 February 2009 7am – Midnight (SUMM.001.002.0001) at 358:28; Exhibit 144 – ABC Local Radio – Disc 1 (TEN.052.001.0001) Exhibit 144 – ABC Local Radio – Disc 1 (TEN.052.001.0001)

<sup>359</sup> Exhibit 144 – ABC Local Radio – Disc 1 (TEN.052.001.0001)

was at the Epsom ICC. He provided information about both the Redesdale and Bendigo fires. In relation to the 'Bracewell Street fire that is burning between Long Gully and Maiden Gully', he said:<sup>360</sup>

*Now, that's heading in towards Long Gully. It's coming across Sparrowhawk Road. It's gone through there, Ingles Street towards the Schweppes Centre. It's also spotting further across the Calder Highway or Marong Road to Mount Alvernia and places around there.*

*The big issue for us at the moment, also, is that the change is starting to come and as we've just tried to work out with the Redesdale fire, it's starting to swing around and is going to be heading sort of to the north, north-east. When that also happens we will be getting it here in Bendigo and it's not far away. So that's going to turn it around back up towards - I guess in a line towards the showgrounds, across in the Eaglehawk Road.*

Superintendent Bull spoke further about the likely effect of the wind change and suggested that, with the wind changing direction, people in the Eaglehawk through to Bendigo North area should implement their fire plans.

19.7 Peter Beaton, a Communications Officer employed by DSE at its Epsom office, was rostered to work as an Information Officer at the Epsom ICC from 17:00 on 7 February 2009. Not long after 17:30 Mr Beaton was directed by Terry Ouroumis, the District Duty Officer for DSE Murray Goldfields District, to go to the Adam Street ICC to be the Information Officer in the IMT for the Bendigo fire.<sup>361</sup>

19.8 Mr Beaton arrived at Adam Street at 18:04. On arrival, he was asked what he needed, and was given a computer, a printer, access to email and a telephone. He had taken with him copies of Fire Information Release forms, and a memory stick and CD containing information and resources for an Information Officer.<sup>362</sup> He immediately set about gathering information about the fire, with the intention of issuing an Urgent Threat Message as soon as possible. The first Urgent Threat Message prepared by Mr Beaton was timed at 18:30, and said:<sup>363</sup>

*The Bracewell fire, burning at the edge of the Bendigo suburbs of West Bendigo and Specimen Hill is burning in a south easterly direction and is estimated to be 400 hectares in size. The communities of West Bendigo and Specimen Hill around Inglis Street and the Calder Highway may be directly impacted upon by this fire.*

19.9 Mr Beaton then attempted to distribute this message by email to the media, the iECC and other recipients within DSE. He encountered a series of technical issues with the email system available to him at the Adam Street ICC, which meant that he had great difficulties sending group emails and many emails did not reach their

<sup>360</sup> Exhibit 79 – Transcript – ABC Central Victoria – Discussion About the Bushfire Situation in and around Bendigo (CFA.001.015.0073) at 0074–0076

<sup>361</sup> Exhibit 471 – Statement of Beaton (WIT.3024.004.0190) [14], [18]–[21]

<sup>362</sup> Exhibit 471 – Statement of Beaton (WIT.3024.004.0190) [22]

<sup>363</sup> Exhibit 471 – Statement of Beaton (WIT.3024.004.0190) [23]–[28], Annexure 2 – Urgent Threat Message 18:30 (DSE.HDD.0012.1659)

intended recipients.<sup>364</sup> This may be why no Urgent Threat Messages for the Bendigo fire appeared on the CFA website between 17:17 and 21:37<sup>365</sup> and no further Urgent Threat Messages were broadcast on ABC 774 until 22:52.<sup>366</sup>

- 19.10 Mr Beaton was first alerted to the email problem when he rang ABC Bendigo, after emailing his first Urgent Threat Message. He discovered that they and also Easymix radio station had not received the email. While working to resolve the email problem, he also faxed subsequent messages to ABC Bendigo and to Easymix. He focused on local radio stations as the most critical recipients, consistent with his aim to tell the people of Bendigo what was happening and where the fire was.<sup>367</sup> This strategy met with some success, with ABC Bendigo broadcasting updated fire information at 18:42, 18:58 and at 19:17.<sup>368</sup> The information broadcast on ABC Bendigo at 18:58 was up to date and included reference to the recent wind change:<sup>369</sup>

*The Bracewell fire, burning at the edge of the Bendigo suburbs of West Bendigo and Specimen Hill, has been burning in a south-easterly direction. We believe from reports of seeing and smelling smoke that the change is starting to move the smoke to head in a north-easterly direction.*

*Residents in the area, sweeping right through from Golden Square and Kangaroo Flat, all the way through to Bendigo North, should be aware that you may be experiencing smoke and burning embers reaching your properties.*

At 19:17 the announcer on ABC Bendigo confirmed that the wind change had come through.<sup>370</sup>

- 19.11 A second Urgent Threat Message was prepared by Mr Beaton and authorised by Mr Rogasch at 19:00:<sup>371</sup>

*The Bracewell fire, burning at the edge of the Bendigo suburbs of West Bendigo and Specimen Hill is burning in a Southeasterly direction and is estimated to be 400 hectares in size. The communities of West Bendigo and Specimen Hill around Ingles Street and the Calder Highway are under ember attack. The fire has reached the Calder Highway in the area of Specimen Hill, and the suburbs of Ironbark, Moonta and Long Gully are under ember attack. A westerly then northwesterly wind change is expected within the next hour, turning the fire towards the East and placing more of Long Gully under ember attack.*

<sup>364</sup> Exhibit 471 – Statement of Beaton (WIT.3024.004.0190) [31]–[34]

<sup>365</sup> Exhibit 3 – Statement of Rees, Annexure 31 (WIT.004.001.0509) at 0565–0629

<sup>366</sup> Exhibit 7 – Transcript, 774 ABC Radio Broadcast – Saturday, 7 February 2009 7am – Midnight (SUMM.001.002.0001) at 535:2

<sup>367</sup> Exhibit 471 – Statement of Beaton (WIT.3024.004.0190) [31], [33], [36]–[37]

<sup>368</sup> Exhibit 144 – ABC Local Radio – Disc 1 (TEN.052.001.0001) Exhibit 144 – ABC Local Radio – Disc 1 (TEN.052.001.0001)

<sup>369</sup> Exhibit 79 – Transcript – ABC Central Victoria (CFA.001.015.0081)

<sup>370</sup> Exhibit 79 – Transcript – ABC Central Victoria (CFA.001.015.0083)

<sup>371</sup> Exhibit 471 – Statement of Beaton (WIT.3024.004.0190) [37], Annexure 3 – Urgent Threat Message 19:00 (DSE.HDD.0012.1660)



As noted above, this message did not reach the CFA website or ABC 774 listeners. It was, however, broadcast on ABC Bendigo at 19:29.<sup>372</sup>

19.12 Mr Beaton prepared a further Urgent Threat Message, timed at 19:30, which warned the same communities as the previous message and added that some homes were under threat in the Long Gully area, and that the fire had cut part of Eaglehawk Road.<sup>373</sup> It was broadcast 'straight off the fax' on ABC Bendigo at 19:44 and repeated at 19:56, when the announcer also conveyed requests from police and the CFA for people to stay off the road and not to sightsee.<sup>374</sup> Again, this message did not reach the CFA website or ABC 774.

19.13 Peter Downes, who by this time had moved from the Epsom ICC to the Adam Street ICC, was interviewed on ABC Bendigo at 20:15. He was able to give a fairly accurate picture of the fire's impact.<sup>375</sup>

*The latest situation on the Bracewell Street fire, it certainly ran very quickly and currently the fire is encompassed in an area from Bracewell Street across to the Maiden Gully, Marong Road and in as far as Eaglehawk Road. The traffic lights at that intersection between the Marong Road and the Eaglehawk Road.*

*We've got 30 units on the fire ground at the moment – that's CFA and DSE – 135 personnel. There are another 40 tankers en route from both Ballart and the Swan Hill area, with another 280 personnel.*

*The fire itself, we – and this is all unconfirmed – we believe there be may be up to 50 houses lost, the majority in the Eaglehawk Road area.*

*The velocity of the fire was one that even those that were expecting something to happen today, it just was way out of the ballpark. The fire is still going. We have problems with gas leaks and explosions and the gas and electricity services to that area of Bendigo are being arranged to be isolated.*

19.14 Mr Downes was on air again at 20:27 with a specific warning that people in the Upper California Gully Road area, between Upper California Gully and Hall Street, should be aware of possible smoke and ember attack.<sup>376</sup> This information was to similar effect as the fourth Urgent Threat Message prepared by Mr Beaton, timed at 20:30.<sup>377</sup>

19.15 Further urgent threat messages were prepared by Mr Beaton timed at 21:30, 22:30

<sup>372</sup> Exhibit 144 – ABC Local Radio – Disc 1 (TEN.052.001.0001) Exhibit 144 – ABC Local Radio – Disc 1 (TEN.052.001.0001)

<sup>373</sup> Exhibit 471 – Statement of Beaton (WIT.3024.004.0190) [39]; Annexure 4 – Urgent Threat Message 19:30 (DSE.HDD.0012.1660)

<sup>374</sup> Exhibit 79 – Transcript – ABC Central Victoria (CFA.001.015.0086), (CFA.001.015.0090); Exhibit 144 – ABC Local Radio – Disc 1 (TEN.052.001.0001) Exhibit 144 – ABC Local Radio – Disc 1 (TEN.052.001.0001)

<sup>375</sup> Exhibit 469 – Statement of Downes (WIT.3004.020.0314) [44]; Exhibit 471 – Statement of Beaton (WIT.3024.004.0190) [40]; Exhibit 79 – Transcript – ABC Central Victoria (CFA.001.015.0099)

<sup>376</sup> Exhibit 79 – Transcript – ABC Central Victoria (CFA.001.015.0105)

<sup>377</sup> Exhibit 471 – Statement of Beaton (WIT.3024.004.0190) [43], Annexure 5 – Urgent Threat Message 20:30 (DSE.HDD.0012.1662)

and 23:30.<sup>378</sup> These messages were posted on the CFA website<sup>379</sup> and were read or referred to on ABC 774.<sup>380</sup> The message timed at 21:30 reached the CFA website at 21:37, just 15 minutes before the fire was declared contained.

- 19.16 The lack of a prepositioned Information Officer and the basic computer facilities at the Adam Street ICC hindered the provision of timely warnings and advice to the public about the Bendigo fire. The Information Unit at the Epsom ICC quickly issued an initial awareness message and a first urgent threat message, which were distributed and broadcast on the ABC.
- 19.17 Mr Beaton did an outstanding job in preparing urgent threat messages after he arrived at the Adam Street ICC, but his efforts were diminished by the email difficulties he encountered. The probable result of these difficulties was that people relying on the CFA website received no new information about the Bendigo fire between 17:17 and 21:37, and ABC 774 listeners heard no urgent threat messages for that fire between 18:00 and 22:52.
- 19.18 Despite these difficulties, there was very good information flow to the community through local radio, in particular ABC Bendigo. Mr Beaton's strategy of ensuring that information was provided to local radio was effective, and was enhanced by ABC Bendigo's thorough reporting of the Bendigo fire.

## 20 EVACUATION

- 20.1 Sergeant Craig Gaffee was the sergeant at the Bendigo police station rostered for duty for the afternoon shift on 7 February 2009. No extra staff had been rostered for work at the Bendigo police station that afternoon.<sup>381</sup> At 16:44 he became aware of the fire in the Maiden Gully area and assumed the role of Forward Commander for the fire. From the time he was able to assess the fire as it approached Maiden Gully Road and Bonazza Road, one of his priorities was to warn people of the fire and inform them that if they wanted to leave they should do so.<sup>382</sup>
- 20.2 To begin with Sergeant Gaffee had three police units available to respond to the fire, although more units arrived in the course of the afternoon.<sup>383</sup> Traffic management was also a priority, but Sergeant Gaffee attempted to keep himself and two other units free of roadblocks so that they could warn people being threatened by fire to

<sup>378</sup> Exhibit 471 – Statement of Beaton (WIT.3024.004.0190) [49]–[54], Annexure 6 – Urgent Threat Message 21:30 (DSE.HDD.0012.1663), Annexure 7 – Urgent Threat Message 22:30 (DSE.HDD.0012.1821), Annexure 8 – Urgent Threat Message 23:30 (DSE.HDD.0012.1822)

<sup>379</sup> Exhibit 3 – Statement of Rees, Annexure 31 (WIT.004.001.0509) at 0640, 0648 and 0655

<sup>380</sup> Exhibit 7 – Transcript, 774 ABC Radio Broadcast – Saturday, 7 February 2009 7am – Midnight (SUMM.001.002.0001) at 519:39, 534:32, 559:34

<sup>381</sup> Gaffee T10336:9–T10335:19

<sup>382</sup> Exhibit 461 – Statement of Gaffee (WIT.3010.006.0199) [19]–[21]; Gaffee T10337:17–T10338:10

<sup>383</sup> Exhibit 461 – Statement of Gaffee (WIT.3010.006.0199) [65]; Gaffee T10336:9–T10336:17, T10338:20–T10338:27, T10346:29–T10347:7

evacuate if that was their plan.<sup>384</sup> Between them they were able to evacuate houses in the areas of Pascoe Street, Bice Lane, Inglis Street, Energetic Street, the Long Gully Estate and Lily Street.<sup>385</sup> After the wind changed and the fire began to move to the north-east towards Eaglehawk, Sergeant Gaffee and other police moved ahead of the fire, warning people in Susan Street, along sections of Eaglehawk Road and Upper California Gully Road, at the Rose Hotel, in Turner Street, Victoria Street, Crowther Street, Market Street and Bullock Street.<sup>386</sup>

- 20.3 Sergeant Gaffee found that an effective method of gaining attention was to drive along a street using the police vehicle's siren and public address system to alert residents to the fact that the fire was approaching.<sup>387</sup> Where possible he and other police went door to door.<sup>388</sup> He and Senior Constable Hiatt took this approach to evacuating residents of Susan Street and along Eaglehawk Road near the Victoria Hill Diggings, an area that came under threat soon after the wind change.<sup>389</sup>

*Visibility was low and Leading Senior Constable Hiatt and I lost visual contact with each other during the evacuation process. We ran from house to house, knocking on each door and advising residents to leave as the fire was in very close proximity. Our intention was to notify all the residents in that area and to do this as quickly as possible. I was both shocked and surprised to find that some residents had hardly undertaken any preparations for fire and our contact was the first time that they had even heard of the fire approaching the area. There was no time to discuss the fire in any great detail. The message advising residents to leave was short and clear.*

- 20.4 The evacuation of residents of areas under threat of fire was done at Sergeant Gaffee's initiative, and not at the request or direction of the CFA as control agency for the fire. It was not until after 19:45 that Sergeant Gaffee was briefed by Mr Gilmore, and was provided with information about the movement and extent of the fire by the CFA. Up to that point he had been gauging the movement of the fire from his own direct observations and those of other police, relayed through D24.<sup>390</sup> This meant that the commendable efforts of Sergeant Gaffee and the police under his command to evacuate areas at risk were reactive rather than systematic.
- 20.5 With the resources that were available initially, police were only able to warn a limited number of residents. By the end of the evening there were 15 to 20 police units responding to the fire. Sergeant Gaffee told the Commission that in hindsight, it would have been useful to have additional police rostered for work and sitting in the station that afternoon.<sup>391</sup> He explained why:<sup>392</sup>

<sup>384</sup> Exhibit 461 – Statement of Gaffee (WIT.3010.006.0199) [28], [32]

<sup>385</sup> Exhibit 461 – Statement of Gaffee (WIT.3010.006.0199) [27], [30], [33], [36], [44]–[45]

<sup>386</sup> Exhibit 461 – Statement of Gaffee (WIT.3010.006.0199) [46], [48]–[51], [55], [57]

<sup>387</sup> Exhibit 461 – Statement of Gaffee (WIT.3010.006.0199) [38]; Gaffee T10340:18–T10340:25

<sup>388</sup> Exhibit 461 – Statement of Gaffee (WIT.3010.006.0199) [48]; Gaffee T10340:26–T10340:29

<sup>389</sup> Exhibit 461 – Statement of Gaffee (WIT.3010.006.0199) [48]

<sup>390</sup> Gaffee T10345:27–T10346:3

<sup>391</sup> Exhibit 461 – Statement of Gaffee (WIT.3010.006.0199) [65]; Gaffee T10346:17–T10347:28

<sup>392</sup> Gaffee T10347:30–T10348:9

*On 7 February I was essentially using rolling traffic management points in that I was trying to use myself and the units I had available to stay ahead of the fire. If I had those resources that I had at the end of the night at the start, I would have been able to establish more traffic management points from a wider area and I also would have had the staff available to warn residents of the danger, actually drive along every street that could have been affected and, if not knock on the doors, then certainly sound the sirens and use the PA system to warn everyone.*

This experience suggests a need for the Victoria Police to roster additional staff when catastrophic fire weather is forecast.<sup>393</sup>

- 20.6 The confusion about the location of the emergency relief centre for those evacuating their homes has been discussed at paragraph 18.10 above.

## 21 ROADBLOCKS

- 21.1 Sergeant Gaffee's other priority in responding to the Bendigo fire was traffic management.<sup>394</sup> Starting at 16:50 when he arrived at Bonazza Road, he directed the available police units to establish roadblocks at strategic points to restrict traffic from entering the fire area. Over the next three hours he monitored the movement of the fire as best he could, and deployed units to critical intersections as they became available, keeping ahead of the fire. Sergeant Gaffee set out in detail the 'rolling' roadblocks established during this period in his statement to the Commission.<sup>395</sup> He observed that it was initially difficult to establish enough roadblocks due to limited resources, but that this became easier as more units became available.<sup>396</sup>
- 21.2 Again, during the critical early period there was no information provided to Sergeant Gaffee by the Adam Street ICC or the CFA generally. He was dependent on what he could observe of the fire himself and information provided by other police and D24.<sup>397</sup> It was not until after 19:45 that Sergeant Gaffee made contact with Mr Gilmore and attended the briefing conducted at the intersection of Eaglehawk Road and Upper California Gully Road over the map drawn on the bonnet of Mr Gilmore's car.<sup>398</sup>
- 21.3 In the course of that briefing Mr Gilmore explained that the main fire was in the area bounded by Marong Road (Calder Highway), Eaglehawk Road and Bracewell Street, and requested police to block off access to this area.<sup>399</sup> In response to that request, Sergeant Gaffee arranged for full road closures to be established at the following

<sup>393</sup> Gaffee T10348:31–T10349:20

<sup>394</sup> Exhibit 461 – Statement of Gaffee (WIT.3010.006.0199) [19]–[21]; Gaffee T10337:17–T10338:10

<sup>395</sup> Exhibit 461 – Statement of Gaffee (WIT.3010.006.0199) [11], [13]

<sup>396</sup> Exhibit 461 – Statement of Gaffee (WIT.3010.006.0199) [65]

<sup>397</sup> Gaffee T10345:27–T10346:3

<sup>398</sup> Exhibit 461 – Statement of Gaffee (WIT.3010.006.0199) [58]; Gaffee T10344:30–T10345:7

<sup>399</sup> Exhibit 461 – Statement of Gaffee (WIT.3010.006.0199) [58]; Gaffee T10345:8–T10345:18

intersections:<sup>400</sup>

- (a) Eaglehawk Road and Marong Road, Ironbark
- (b) Eaglehawk Road and Victoria Street, Ironbark
- (c) Eaglehawk Road and Creeth Street, Long Gully
- (d) Eaglehawk Road and Holdsworth Road, Long Gully
- (e) Eaglehawk Road and Sandhurst Road, California Gully
- (f) High Street and Victoria Street, Eaglehawk
- (g) Peg Leg Road and Caldwell's Road, Eaglehawk
- (h) Bracewell Street and Upper Road, Eaglehawk
- (i) Bracewell Street and Golf Links Road, Maiden Gully
- (j) Golf Links Road and Maiden Gully Road Maiden Gully
- (k) Marong Road and Specimen Hill Road, Golden Square.

As it turned out, Sergeant Gaffee had already put in place roadblocks at about half of these intersections.<sup>401</sup>

- 21.4 Mr Smith observed that the roadblocks put in place on 7 February 2009 were ineffective, because people could easily avoid them by taking back roads.<sup>402</sup> Sergeant Gaffee acknowledged that, in such a built up area, people could get around a roadblock fairly readily if they chose to do so.<sup>403</sup> This may explain why police on roadblocks in Bendigo did not report any difficulties in implementing full road closures in accordance with the guidelines for traffic management during bushfires.<sup>404</sup>

## 22 COMMUNICATIONS

- 22.1 A feature of the Bendigo fire was the almost total breakdown of radio communications between the fire ground and the Adam Street ICC. The communication difficulties experienced by the ICC have been discussed at paragraph 16.8 above. Mr Gilmore described the situation on the fire ground:<sup>405</sup>

*While I was tasking the above people, I also made many attempts to contact Bracewell Street control. I was trying to contact the CFA field commanders to tell them that I was there and to liaise and assist them with the planning and tasking of resources. I used the fire service radio to try to contact them. I was broadcasting in the manner that I would normally do so, but I received no response. In all other respects, I can say that my radio appeared to be working at that time. I had been talking to other people and had been successful and I could still hear other traffic on the radio.*

- 22.2 Mr Wilkie of the DSE experienced similar radio communication problems from the

<sup>400</sup> Exhibit 461 – Statement of Gaffee (WIT.3010.006.0199) [59]

<sup>401</sup> Gaffee T10345:19–T10345:26

<sup>402</sup> Exhibit 456 – Statement of Smith (WIT.3004.020.0219) [38]; E Smith T10238:30–T10239:16

<sup>403</sup> Gaffee T10343:31–T10344:12

<sup>404</sup> Gaffee T10344:19–T10344:29

<sup>405</sup> Exhibit 458 – Statement of Gilmore (WIT.3004.019.0001) [65]

fire ground,<sup>406</sup> which suggests that it was not only the CFA's radio system that struggled.

- 22.3 In the absence of any other explanation, Mr Gilmore and other firefighters in Bendigo have developed a theory that it was the smoke plume created by the fire that interfered with radio communications.<sup>407</sup> In support of this theory, Mr Gilmore pointed out that it was possible to transmit sideways from the fire ground, for example to the Bendigo RECC, but that communications with the Adam Street ICC, directly in the path of the smoke plume, were very hit and miss.<sup>408</sup> Some technical evidence about the effect of smoke on radio communications is required before the Commission could accept this theory. If the theory proves correct, however, it is a matter of grave concern that the fire agencies' radio systems do not function reliably in the presence of smoke.

## 23 PROPOSED KEY FINDINGS

- 23.1 The Commission should make the following key findings.
- 23.2 While the planning and prepositioning of staff at the Epsom ICC was exemplary, the management of CFA Region 2 did not plan adequately for the eventuality that more than one significant fire might break out in the region on 7 February 2009. When the second fire did break out on the outskirts of Bendigo, the facilities and the personnel available to manage the incident were inadequate. The Adam Street ICC was largely irrelevant to the response to the fire in the critical hours before and immediately after the wind change.
- 23.3 It is a credit to the firefighters who responded to the Bendigo fire that they were able to establish a working incident management structure on the fire ground and deploy resources reasonably effectively.
- 23.4 With a quick and active initial response the CFA might have been able to bring the Bendigo fire under control. However, with the delay in members of the public being able to report the fire to 000, and the consequent delay in brigades being paged, it was 20 to 30 minutes before the first firefighters arrived. By that time the fire was out of control.
- 23.5 Fuel reduction on the western outskirts of Bendigo, in particular the burn in the Dai Gum San diggings in Spring 2008, was critical in reducing the impact of the Bendigo fire on residential areas.
- 23.6 There was a deal of unnecessary confusion about the location of the emergency relief centre in Bendigo on 7 February 2009, and poor advice to the public about

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<sup>406</sup> Exhibit 462 – Statement of Wilkie (SUMM.044.002.3887) at 3888

<sup>407</sup> Gilmore T10273:12–T10274:11; Rogasch T10260:6–T10260:18

<sup>408</sup> Gilmore T10273:27–T10274:11

where those evacuating could go. This confusion might have been avoided with better communication between the Adam Street ICC and the MECC, in particular with earlier attendance by a CFA liaison officer at the MECC.

- 23.7 An inter-agency initiative that worked well was the allocation of a police member to each of the sector commanders for the Bendigo fire later in the evening of 7 February 2009.
- 23.8 The lack of a prepositioned Information Officer and the very basic computer facilities at the Adam Street ICC hindered the provision of timely warnings and advice to the public about the Bendigo fire. The Information Officer, Mr Beaton, did an outstanding job in preparing urgent threat messages after he arrived at the Adam Street ICC, but his efforts were diminished by the email difficulties he encountered. The probable result of these difficulties was that people relying on the CFA website received no new information about the Bendigo fire between 17:17 and 21:37, and ABC 774 listeners heard no urgent threat messages for that fire between 18:00 and 22:52.
- 23.9 In spite of these difficulties, there was very good information flow to the community through local radio, in particular ABC Bendigo. Mr Beaton's strategy of ensuring that information was provided to local radio was effective, and was enhanced by ABC Bendigo's thorough reporting of the Bendigo fire.
- 23.10 The evacuation of residents of areas under threat of fire was done at the initiative of police, and not at the request or direction of the CFA as control agency for the fire. During the early hours of the fire Sergeant Gaffee had limited information about the movement and extent of the fire, gained by his own direct observations and those of other police relayed through D24. This meant that the commendable efforts of Sergeant Gaffee and the police under his command to evacuate areas at risk were reactive rather than systematic.
- 23.11 With the resources that were available initially, police were only able to warn a limited number of residents. Had additional police been rostered for work on the afternoon of 7 February 2009, Sergeant Gaffee would have been able to warn more residents of areas under threat of fire, as well as managing traffic more effectively. This experience suggests a need for the Victoria Police to roster additional staff when catastrophic fire weather is forecast.
- 23.12 A feature of the Bendigo fire was the almost total breakdown of radio communications between the fire ground and the Adam Street ICC. In the absence of any other explanation, firefighters in Bendigo have developed a theory that it was the smoke plume created by the fire that interfered with radio communications with the ICC. While this theory cannot be accepted in the absence of technical evidence, it would be a matter of grave concern if it is the case that the fire agencies' radio systems do not function reliably in the presence of smoke.

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