



THE CHURCHILL FIRE

9

9 THE CHURCHILL FIRE

Churchill is about 160 kilometres south-east of Melbourne, in Latrobe City and Wellington Shires, which are part of the Latrobe Valley.

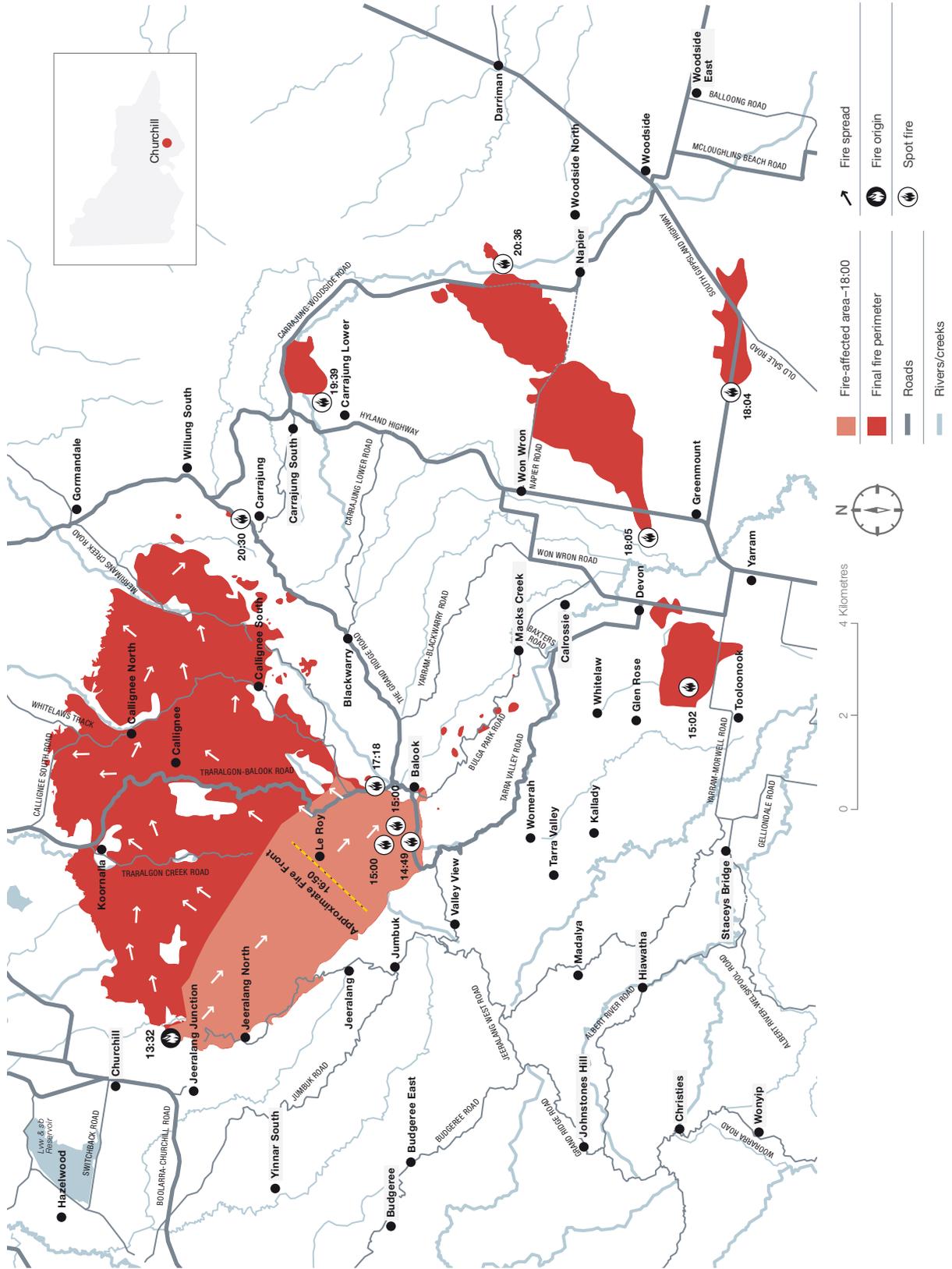
The Churchill fire started at about 13:32 on 7 February 2009, 3 kilometres south-east of the Churchill fire station. During the afternoon and early evening the fire travelled rapidly, affecting Jeeralang North, Balook, Le Roy, Koornalla, Callignee, Callignee North, Callignee South, Hazelwood South, Hazelwood North, Traralgon South, Devon, Yarram and Carrajung South. The Loy Yang power station, part of Victoria’s critical infrastructure, is about 25 kilometres from Churchill and came under threat.

Although the fire was at its most destructive on 7 February, it was not reported as controlled until 19 February. Eleven people died as a result of the fire, 145 houses were destroyed, and more than 25,861 hectares were burnt. Figure 9.1 shows the extent of the fire.

OVERVIEW

Maximum temperature	The maximum temperature recorded was 46.1°C at Latrobe Valley automatic weather station at 16:02. ¹
Minimum relative humidity	The minimum relative humidity recorded on 7 February was 8 per cent at Latrobe Valley AWS at 15:43. ²
Wind	The maximum winds recorded before the wind change were north-north-westerly at 44 kilometres an hour at Latrobe Valley AWS at 15:43. ³ The south-westerly wind change was recorded by the Latrobe Valley AWS at 18:18. ⁴ The maximum winds recorded after the wind change were 46 kilometres an hour at Latrobe Valley AWS at 18:20. ⁵
Fire danger index	The maximum Forest Fire Danger Index was 103 at Latrobe Valley AWS at 16:00. ⁶
Cause	Suspicious. ⁷
Fatalities	Eleven fatalities. ⁸
Casualties	Thirty-five casualties. ⁹
Houses destroyed	One hundred and forty-five houses. ¹⁰
Overall area burnt	25,861 hectares. ¹¹
Firefighting resources	On 7 February 409 CFA and 167 NEO personnel attended the fire. They were supported by 76 CFA appliances, 29 NEO appliances and 4 aircraft. 33 HVP firefighters also provided support. ¹²

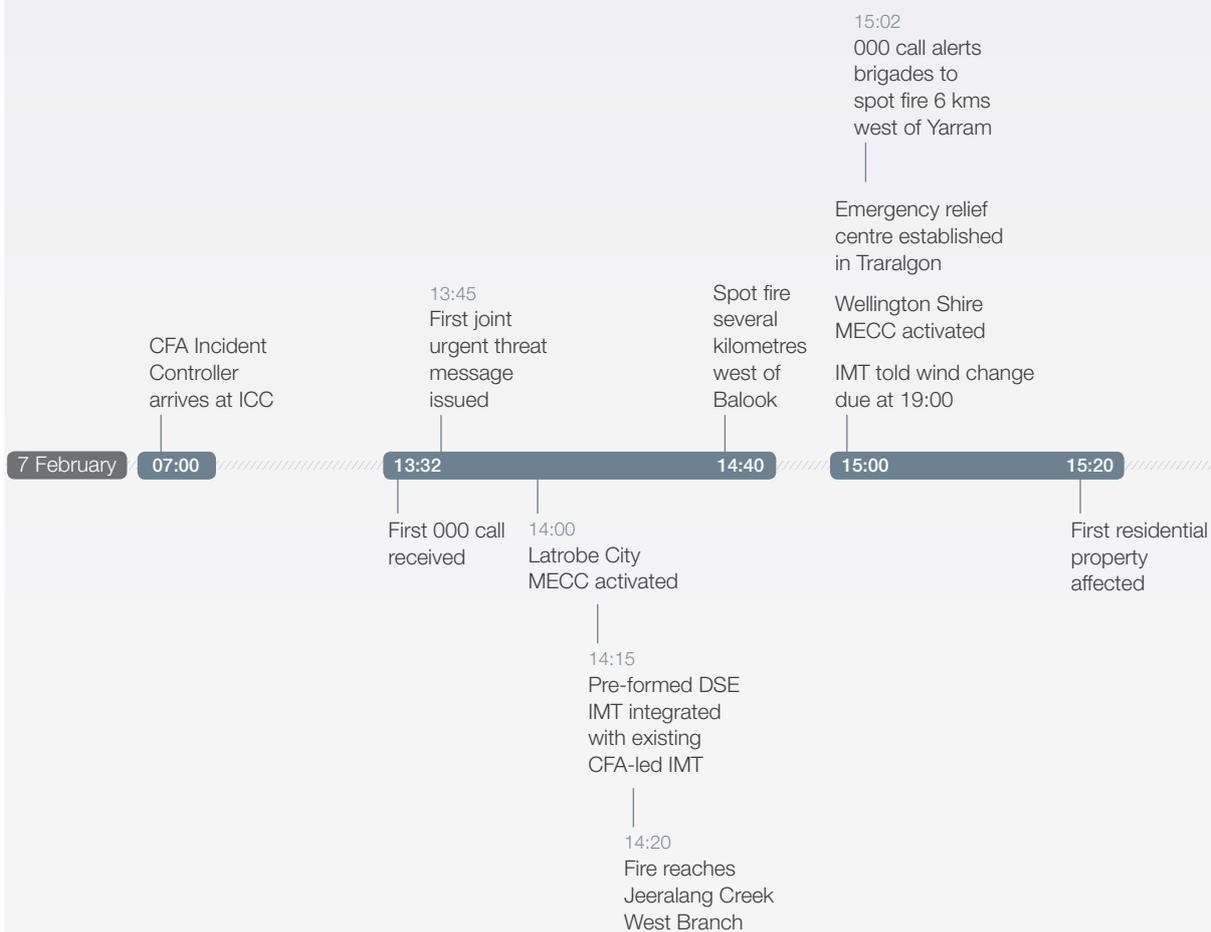
Figure 9.1 The Churchill fire

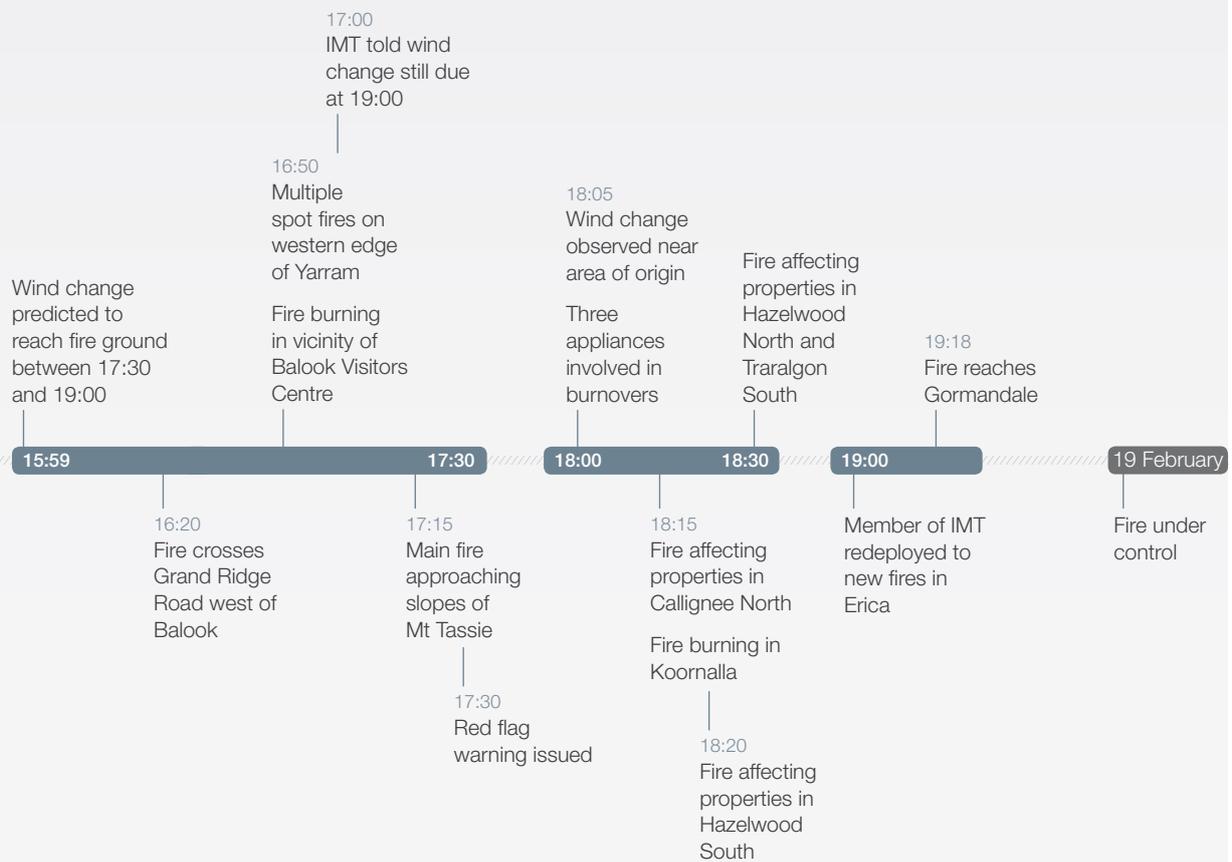


Source: Exhibit 994 – Churchill Fire – Fire Spread Map.¹³

Churchill 7-19 February

The following time line summarises events associated with the Churchill fire. For the most part, the times given are approximate. Further details about the events are provided in the accompanying narrative.





9.1 SEQUENCE OF EVENTS

9.1.1 PREPARATION

Before 7 February the Country Fire Authority and the Department of Sustainability and Environment had already been providing support in response to the Delburn fires (see Chapter 3).¹⁴

The CFA had been managing the Delburn fires using a level 2 incident management team at the Traralgon DSE office since 29 January. Mr Peter Lockwood was the day-shift Incident Controller on 7 February. Authorised to perform the role of a level 3 Incident Controller subject to the guidance of a mentor, he arrived at the Traralgon Incident Control Centre at 07:00, in readiness for starting work at 08:00 following a handover from the night-shift Incident Controller. He spent the morning focusing on the Delburn fires.¹⁵

In addition to the continuing management requirements of the Delburn fires, as a precautionary measure DSE established a further incident management team that was pre-positioned at the Traralgon DSE office on 7 February. Mr Lawrie Jeremiah, a DSE recovery manager and qualified level 3 Incident Controller, was rostered on.¹⁶

The Latrobe City Municipal Emergency Coordination Centre had been opened at the direction of Senior Sergeant Brendan Scully, who was the Municipal Emergency Response Coordinator, on 29 January in response to the Delburn fires. It was de-activated on 6 February, although it remained ready to operate. As Senior Sergeant Scully explained, 'We just needed to unlock the door and sit down and resume co-ordination duties'.¹⁷

Table 9.1 summarises the state of preparedness for the Churchill fire.

Table 9.1 The Churchill fire – IMT preparedness

Pre-designated level 3 ICC	Yes ¹⁸
Pre-formed IMT at ICC	Yes (in place from Delburn fire) ¹⁹
Pre-identified level 3 IC	No ²⁰
Pre-identified IMT members	Yes ²¹
Time fire started	Approximately 13:32 ²²
Full IMT in place by	IMT already in place for Delburn fires
Safety adviser appointed	No ²³

9.1.2 7 FEBRUARY

Origin and cause

At about 13:32 on 7 February a caller to 000 reported a fire about 3 kilometres south-east of Churchill fire station, near the intersection of Glendonald and Jelleff's Outlet Roads. The fire had started in the bottom of a natural basin—the Bennett's Creek catchment—in the vicinity of forests managed by Hancock Victorian Plantations. The vegetation in the area consisted of blue-gum and pine plantations of varying ages with an understorey of shrubs, wire grass, blackberry and other surface fuels. The overall fuel hazard was very high.²⁴

CFA investigators and Victoria Police determined the cause of the Churchill fire to be suspicious. In order that the criminal investigations and proceedings not be prejudiced, the Commission heard no evidence about the cause of the fire.

Fire run, response and management

At 13:35 air attack supervisor Mr David O'Toole, who was already airborne, described a 'significant column of dark smoke'—'hundreds of feet' high—south-east of Churchill. Although Mr O'Toole was 10 kilometres from Churchill at the time, he 'knew that the fire was going to be unstoppable as direct attack would likely fail'. It was estimated that 10 minutes after it started the fire had travelled about a kilometre.²⁵

A Hancock Victorian Plantations surveillance plane (with pilot and observer) had been flying a circuit around the Latrobe Valley since early in the day. At about the same time as Mr O'Toole reported his observations, the plane responded to a CFA request to divert to Churchill, where it did reconnaissance work, continuing this until 16:30. HVP's first-attack helicopter was at Latrobe Valley airport with the pilot on standby ready to fly; it assisted with the initial attack within 15 minutes of the fire being reported.²⁶

Crews from Churchill fire station were first alerted to the fire by a member of the public who reported it directly to the station. Crew members were able to see a smoke column emanating from the plantation to the south-east of the station. By the time the first crew arrived at the scene the fire had spread rapidly to the south-east and was burning on both sides of Jelleff's Outlet Road. Even at this early stage the fire behaviour was extreme, with crowning in the plantation.²⁷

As the Churchill pumper crew made their way towards Glendonald Road they reported that 'a huge plume of smoke was already evident'. A request was made for 20 more tankers along with air support. Fire-bombing was of limited value because of the extreme wind and erratic flying conditions. The water was dispersing before hitting the ground.²⁸

Initially Mr Steven Barling, captain of the Churchill fire brigade and a divisional commander, took on the role of Incident Controller before handing over to the Traralgon Incident Control Centre.²⁹

While monitoring the Delburn fires at about 13:45, Mr Lockwood, who was at the Traralgon ICC, noticed in the CFA Incident Management System a fire at Churchill, in a pine plantation on Glendonald Road. He promptly informed the HVP liaison officer, and they discussed the plantations in the area, the possible run of the fire and its potential impact.³⁰

The first urgent threat message was issued at 13:45 for the communities of Hazelwood South, Jeeralang, Jeeralang North and Jeeralang Junction. The CFA and DSE continued to issue warnings throughout the afternoon. Between 13:45 and 17:30 a further seven fire information releases were issued, warning communities that were likely to be affected before the forecast arrival of the south-westerly wind change. Mr Lockwood also did interviews with local ABC radio and 774 ABC.³¹

In addition to official warnings, firefighters liaised with police to warn communities of the fire and the expected wind change. Police also warned communities on their own initiative. Forward Commander Sergeant Clinton Wilson used any spare police capacity to warn residents—particularly those in Callignee, Traralgon South and Koornalla.³²

In view of the rapid spread of the fire and the significant spotting, the first crews on the scene could not engage in direct attack from the start. The focus quickly turned to advising residents and protecting houses in the Glendonald Road area.³³

Mr Bruce Mongan, Sector Commander, directed some firefighting crews to the east of the area of origin, with the aim of stopping the fire before it reached houses, and sent other crews to Jelleff's Outlet Road to protect properties. He asked police to arrange roadblocks around the fire. By 14:00 additional crews had turned out and were being deployed along Thomson Road. The fire continued to spread quickly, crowning uphill to the south-east, through the broad valley of Bennett's Creek and towards the community of Balook.³⁴

Municipal Emergency Resource Officer Ms Sheryl English received a call from the Municipal Emergency Response Coordinator about 13:45, informing her of the outbreak of the Churchill fire. The Latrobe City Municipal Emergency Coordination Centre was activated at about 14:00.³⁵

Observations by air crew record that before 14:10 the fire was cresting the ridge along which Jeeralang North Road runs, and by 14:20 the head of the fire had reached Jeeralang Creek West Branch. The fire had travelled about 7 kilometres in 50 minutes. From his aircraft Mr O'Toole reported that a spot fire had become established in steep country several kilometres west of Balook at 14:40, in the headwaters of Little Traralgon Creek. Several further spot fires were reported by a fire tower observer in the same area during the following 20 minutes.³⁶

At about 14:15, following discussions between the DSE State Duty Officer, the Regional Duty Officer and the Area Manager, 'it was agreed that the existing CFA-led IMT already managing the Delburn fires at the Traralgon ICC would manage the new fire'. As a result, the pre-formed DSE IMT was integrated with the existing CFA-led IMT that was managing the Delburn fires, and Mr Lockwood was the Incident Controller for both incidents. Mr Jeremiah was assigned the role of Deputy Incident Controller.³⁷

This was in accordance with prevailing practice: the fire had started on private land and Mr Lockwood was from the CFA. He was, however, less qualified and less experienced than Mr Jeremiah and, as noted, was authorised to occupy the level 3 Incident Controller position only when supervised by a mentor. No mentor was appointed on 7 February.³⁸

In its interim report the Commission said this method of selection was flawed, and it recommended that the CFA and DSE develop procedures aimed at ensuring that Incident Controllers are appointed on the basis of competency, regardless of the point of ignition of a fire. The CFA and DSE have since implemented this recommendation.³⁹

With the exception of the position of safety adviser, all other key roles were filled in the Churchill incident management team. Appointing a safety adviser is mandatory for all level 3 incidents under a joint CFA–DSE standard operating procedure.⁴⁰ The appointment of safety advisers is discussed in Chapter 3 of Volume II.

By 14:45 the fire had burnt through steep terrain and a pine plantation and had damaged a microwave communication tower.⁴¹

During the first IMT meeting, at 15:00, staff were told by Planning Officer Mr Andy Gillham that the south-westerly wind change was due at 19:00. At the time Mr Ross Pridgeon, who headed the Strategic Planning Unit, produced one of two maps developed during the day. This map took no account of the potential effect of the predicted wind change. The second map, issued at 21:00, failed to incorporate any prediction of future fire spread: it simply showed an estimate of the fire spread at that time.⁴²

By 15:00 emergency relief centres were established in Traralgon and Morwell. Further relief centres were established, in Sale and Yarram, later in the evening. The Wellington Shire Municipal Emergency Coordination Centre was activated shortly after 15:00.⁴³

As a result of a 000 call at 15:02, brigades were alerted to a spot fire in the Mays Bush – Jack River Reserve, 6 kilometres west of Yarram. This was 14 kilometres from spot fires in the Little Traralgon Creek headwaters and about 20 kilometres south-east of the head of the fire.⁴⁴

Efforts to protect assets continued during the afternoon. At about 15:00 Mr Mongan released the Toongabbie tanker, whose crew wanted to return to protect Toongabbie. Throughout the afternoon, before the wind change, he and Mr David Street, crew leader on the Traralgon East tanker, attended properties along Jeeralang West Road, doorknocking, issuing warnings and helping residents. Despite their efforts, the spreading flank fire destroyed a home at the intersection of Thomson Road and Jeeralang North Road at about 15:20. This was the first home to be burnt by the Churchill fire.⁴⁵

At 15:59 a local forecast for the Churchill area received by the incident management team had predicted the wind change reaching the fire ground between 17:30 and 19:00. Gusty south-westerly winds were expected to follow the change. Despite receipt of this forecast, staff at the next IMT meeting, at 17:00, were given by the Planning Officer the predicted wind change time (19:00) that had been given to the 15:00 meeting.⁴⁶

Image 9.1 shows the view of the fire from the Yarram CFA station.

Image 9.1



Source: Courtesy of the *Herald & Weekly Times*.

The fire was reported as crossing Grand Ridge Road west of Balook at 16:20; 30 minutes later it was said to be burning in the vicinity of the Balook Visitors Centre. Multiple spot fires were recorded in grassland on the western edge of the township of Yarram, and by about 17:15 the main fire was approaching the slopes of Mt Tassie and spotting to the mountain's east side.⁴⁷

The spot fires increasingly strained resources as crews and equipment were diverted to the emerging fire threat some distance from the head of the fire. The Yarram spot fires threatened the Carter Holt Harvey Mill, but CFA crews managed to save the mill with the help of crews from Hancock Victorian Plantations.⁴⁸

Box 9.1 Forest industry brigades

Under Victoria's *Country Fire Authority Act 1958* Hancock Victorian Plantations is required to maintain seven industry brigades to help protect its plantations. The company maintains crew and appliances well in excess of this statutory requirement.⁴⁹ Ms Linda Sewell, Chief Executive Officer of HVP, explained why HVP kept more crews: 'Our application of resources is not about what our legal requirement is. It is what we believe is necessary in order to protect our people, our plantations and the communities in which our plantations are'.⁵⁰

HVP firefighters are trained through the CFA and DSE. They carry pagers and are alerted about attendance at fires in the same way as CFA brigades.⁵¹

Although a forest industry brigade is responsible only for fire suppression on plantation holdings of the owner or group of owners who formed the brigade, the Commission was advised that HVP crews regularly attend fires outside the company's plantations, often some distance away. More than 50 per cent of the fires HVP's forest industry brigades attend are not on HVP land.⁵²

On 7 February HVP was in a high state of readiness. Personnel were located across HVP depots and in fire towers at Flynn, Longford and Stockdale, and heavy machinery—bulldozers, graders, and so on—was at various locations. Twelve HVP firefighters were patrolling for arson activity.⁵³

HVP's response to the firefighting effort was rapid and included subsequent despatch of resources to Yarram. The HVP Churchill office had staff ready for deployment to any fire that might break out on the day. In addition, an HVP fire coordinator was acting as a liaison officer at the ICC in Traralgon.⁵⁴

At about 17:30 the incident management team received information about the impact of the wind change at Bunyip; this suggested the change would probably arrive earlier than 19:00. The Incident Controller directed that all aircraft be grounded and that red flag warnings be issued.⁵⁵

Despite this, the air attack supervisor, Mr O'Toole, who had difficulty communicating with the incident management team throughout the day, received from the team no direct communication about the predicted change in the weather. Rather, having noticed the wind becoming erratic at 17:27, he asked the air base for an update on the forecast change. A few minutes later the base told him he should return immediately because a severe wind change was imminent. Mr O'Toole landed only minutes before the change arrived. He explained that if he and his pilot had still been airborne when the wind changed it would have posed 'a significant threat to our safety'.⁵⁶

At 17:47 the wind change passed through Boolarra, 5 kilometres south-west of where the fire had started and about 26 kilometres west of the head of the fire. It was recorded at the Yarram automatic weather station at 18:03 and reached the fire's area of origin by 18:05.⁵⁷

The wind change turned the fire to the north-east, causing spotting towards Callignee, Traralgon South and Koornalla. A 13-kilometre-long uncontrolled flank of fire, running from the area of origin through to the east side of Mt Tassie, developed. Heavy fuel loads, steep terrain and the extreme weather caused the fire to produce huge pieces of airborne burning debris. Witnesses described the fire as 'travelling as a mass of embers that ignited the surrounding vegetation almost instantly on their arrival, then propagating more burning debris to become airborne again'. No warnings were issued for Koornalla, Callignee, Callignee South and Callignee North before the wind change.⁵⁸

It was after the wind change that the fire was at its most dangerous; it progressively burned through Hazelwood North, Hazelwood South (where two people died), Koornalla (where four people died), Traralgon South, Callignee (where four people died), Callignee South, Callignee North, Jeeralang (where one person died), Jeeralang North, Devon, Yarram and Carrajung South and on to Won Wron State Forest.⁵⁹ Chapter 17 in this volume discusses the circumstances surrounding the 11 deaths that occurred.

Between 18:00 and 18:50 reports said that the fire was affecting properties in Koornalla, Callignee North, Hazelwood South, Hazelwood North and Traralgon South.⁶⁰

During the course of the fire three CFA tankers were involved in burnovers. Additionally, a fourth tanker, Traralgon Tanker 1, was placed in a very dangerous position. All the burnovers occurred during suppression activities on Glendonald Road shortly after 18:00, when the wind change arrived. In each case the crews had heard a red flag warning at about 17:30, advising of an expected wind change at 19:00. The early arrival of the wind change, about an hour earlier than predicted, caught crews by surprise.⁶¹

The Glengarry West tanker report said the burnover hit with 'great ferocity'. Three crew members were unable to return to the tanker because of the fire's intensity and were forced to break into an indoor swimming pool area to take shelter. One crew member, Mr Norm Ingliss, remained on the tanker deck operating a fog spray. He sustained minor burns to his hands and face. The crew leader, Mr Graeme Chesterton, remained in the cabin and, while lying on the cabin floor, sent out a mayday call.⁶²

Mr Chesterton described the experience of the burnover as 'terrifying', stating that he was fearful for his safety and that of his crew.⁶³ He also described what happened when the wind change arrived:

I could see embers start to fall. It was like they were coming from everywhere. ... It became very smoky and everything started to burn rapidly. There were spot fires on the ground all around me and the trees started burning. At that stage I guessed I had about 10 to 15 seconds until I would have to make a move. Within those 15 seconds, the conditions deteriorated so rapidly that I realised it wasn't safe to leave the truck ... At that time I did not know where all my crew members were. I thought they could be on the back of the truck, or out and around the house. I made the decision to make a mayday call at that stage. I said on the radio 'Mayday call, Mayday call, Glengarry West tanker'. I would then have said something along the lines of 'we are completely surrounded by fire'.⁶⁴

The crew estimated that the burnover took more than 10 minutes. Some on the fire ground were seriously affected by these events. Mr Mongan testified that as he and his crew took shelter he heard two mayday calls on the radio. But there was nothing he could do to help: 'Hearing the messages made an impact on me at the time because I wasn't able to do something to assist the crews in any way'.⁶⁵

At about 19:00 a separate fire had started near Erica. Personnel and resources were redeployed to deal with this fire, drawing them away from the Churchill fire.⁶⁶

At 19:18 the fire had reached Gormandale.⁶⁷

The spread of the Churchill fire had slowed by about 20:00, although the fire continued to move north-east.⁶⁸

9.1.3 AFTER 7 FEBRUARY

Although much of the fire was brought to a halt on 8 February, some areas were inaccessible, and burning continued in heavily fuelled areas. The fire was not listed as controlled until 18:00 on 19 February.⁶⁹

The Latrobe City Municipal Emergency Coordination Centre received 247 requests for assistance during the Churchill fire. The MECC ceased operating on 20 February. The emergency relief centre in Traralgon was attended by thousands of people in the days and weeks following the fire.⁷⁰

The Churchill fire burnt more than 25,861 hectares, resulted in the death of 11 people, and destroyed 145 homes.⁷¹

9.2 INCIDENT MANAGEMENT

The IMT for the Churchill fire did not prepare an incident action plan for 7 February. Mr Geoffrey Kennedy, operations officer, said he would not have expected to see an incident shift plan for a fire like this, because of the fire's speed and rapidly changing nature. (An 'incident shift plan' is an alternative name for an 'incident action plan'.) Indeed, the AIMS manual recognises that it can be 'extremely difficult' to develop a written plan during rapidly escalating incidents. In such cases, the manual specifies that 'an assessment of the situation should still occur and an objective be determined'. The State of Victoria submitted that objectives for the incident were in fact determined and that these objectives were firefighter safety and the protection of life and property.⁷²

In 2002, when reporting on the deaths resulting from the Linton fire, the coroner noted that one of the roles of an incident action plan is to put senior members of the incident management team in a position:

... to consider, analyse and evaluate all relevant material so that the appropriate direction ... can be given to those on the fire ground not possessed of all requisite information needed to make appropriate decisions, in terms of safety and operational effectiveness.⁷³

Mr Barling stated to the Commission that, although he had some interaction during the fire with Mr Brett Mitchell, the deputy operations officer, he did not receive a plan and nor was he given strategic direction. He said he made his own decisions about deployment of crew and sector command.⁷⁴ Firefighters on the fire ground did their best in the circumstances, under the direction of their local superiors.

The State Emergency Response Plan provides that the decision to recommend evacuation rests with the control agency—in this case, the fire agencies. In accordance with then-current agency practice, however, the incident management team did not consider evacuation of any towns or localities affected by the Churchill fire.⁷⁵

On 7 February the Operations Unit's ability to adequately manage and track resources for the fire was limited by the Planning Unit's failure to produce any lists or charts detailing which resources had been sent to the fire and which remained available for deployment. This, at least in part, appeared to be because information was not being passed 'up the chain of command' from the field. It resulted in confusion about the identity, location and roles of the personnel on the fire ground and difficulties with communication and resourcing decisions. Inevitably, it led to inefficiencies and uncertainty.⁷⁶

On the fire ground Mr Barling used 'T-cards'—a manual system of recording resources involving the use of paper cards shaped like a 'T'—to track the tankers under his control. Information from the T-card system was not used for making resource decisions in the Churchill Incident Management Team.⁷⁷ Chapter 3 in Volume II discusses in detail the management of resources.

The planning officer, Mr Andrew Gillham, inaccurately reported to successive IMT meetings that the wind change was expected to affect the Churchill fire at 19:00, despite local forecasts provided by the Bureau of Meteorology saying the change could arrive as early as 17:30. The idea that a wind change would arrive at 19:00 was widely held among members of the IMT and repeated in many contexts—including in Incident Management System data, in media interviews and in logs used by personnel. Senior officers in the IMT used the forecast of a wind change at 19:00 in a red flag warning that was issued at about 17:30; others were advised that the change would arrive at 18:30. The change actually reached the fire ground at about 18:18.⁷⁸

This confusing array of wind change predictions, combined with the integrated Emergency Coordination Centre's failure to provide to the IMT crucial and accurate wind change information it had on hand from 16:50—meant that predictive mapping work done by members of the Churchill IMT, although of some use in estimating the spread of the fire, failed to take into account the impact of the most recent and accurate weather information available and the impact of the wind change.⁷⁹

The IMT did not provide a communications plan to crews on the ground. Throughout the day there were communication difficulties, including difficulties communicating between firefighting crews and between air crew, ground crew and the IMT.⁸⁰

An example of these problems was highlighted in the CFA investigation of a burnover involving Boolarra Tanker 3. The investigators found there was a lack of communication between the incident control centre and the tanker crew throughout the day and concluded that the tanker was engaged in suppression activities while being unaware of the ICC or the command structure on the fire ground. The tanker did not receive the red flag warning directly: rather, it 'monitored', or overheard, it being issued to other areas. The investigators' report concluded:

The Communications Plan was established at the ICC but was not transmitted to local crews for adoption at the fire line. The local brigades used a fire ground channel as no Communications Plan was established. Communication occurred between the local group members but not to the ICC or to strike teams from outside region 10.⁸¹

On detailed examination, it was found that record keeping by the IMT and personnel on the fire ground did not comply with the standard operating procedures of both the CFA and DSE. Specifically, important details about the dissemination of red flag warnings were not recorded.⁸²

9.2.1 PROTECTION OF CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

A central objective of the incident management team—using CFA, DSE, MFB and Loy Yang personnel—on 7 February was the protection of critical state infrastructure in the Latrobe Valley. Among the assets protected were the Hazelwood power station and mine, the Loy Yang power station, the open-cut mine at Morwell, Bass Link power assets, Mt Tassie communication towers, and the SP AusNet microwave tower.⁸³

Loy Yang is a vital piece of Victoria's infrastructure. Although criticised for some shortcomings, the Churchill Incident Management Team deserves credit for its effective planning and management to protect Loy Yang. IMT staff and fire crews worked well with Loy Yang staff. Communication between the IMT and Loy Yang staff was excellent, and this contributed to the successful implementation of Loy Yang's emergency management plans and helped ensure that the infrastructure was not significantly affected by the fires.⁸⁴ Loy Yang management is also to be commended for its level of preparation for major fires.

Box 9.2 One example of many

Throughout 7 February Mr Craig Wood, a long-serving CFA volunteer and captain of the Willung South fire brigade, and his crew focused on suppression and asset protection in response to the Churchill fire, at times placing themselves at great risk.

Along with many others, Mr Wood and his crew helped divert the fire away from Traralgon South and protect the Loy Yang power station. They helped evacuate to safety a number of people from Callignee. The bravery of all those involved is commended.

During the day Mr Wood's own farm came under threat and was left unprotected. He described the choice he faced: 'My task was far greater than my own farm'. This, he said, was something he 'tucked ... into the back of my mind' as he instead turned to 'concentrate on what you need to do for the betterment of the larger and broader community'.⁸⁵

Mr Wood and his crew provide just one example of the courage and generosity of men and women who fought the fires on 7 February.

9.3 CONCLUSIONS

There were numerous examples of courage, initiative and professionalism where crews responded to local situations. This might not have influenced the spread of the fire, but at the local level it increased community and firefighter safety, protected houses and property, and supported local crews who were both fighting the fires and risking their own homes and businesses.

It is the Commission's view that the incident management team for the Churchill fire demonstrated shortcomings in management and planning. The CFA's appointment of an inexperienced Incident Controller who required mentoring—and did not receive it—contributed to these deficiencies.

Broad objectives such as firefighter safety and protection of life and property do not alone constitute the necessary strategic and operational direction for managing a rapidly unfolding, complex event such as the Churchill fire. Although incident action plans might not have been completed for other fires, the Commission considers that the absence of such a plan in the Churchill IMT contributed to the lack of organisation and affected the efficiency of those working on the Churchill fire.

The training received by the crews who successfully sheltered during burnover events is commendable. The crews' survival is testimony to effective training and good tanker design, and it highlights the progress made since the Linton tragedy in 1998.

The absence of a circulated communications plan—combined with the already noted absence of an incident action plan and the lack of awareness of resources on the fire ground—contributed to the communication difficulties. The Commission recognises that operational communications pose continuing challenges, but a lack of communication planning or planning advice is inexcusable.

The planning officer's inaccurate reporting of the time of the wind change reflects the IMT's lack of understanding of the importance of local forecasts, and the vital wind change information contained within them, for communities and for firefighter safety. Chapter 2 in Volume II discusses the importance of accurately interpreting local weather forecasts.

The Strategic Planning Unit should have taken into account the impact of the wind change when preparing predictive maps. The maps the unit produced were of little assistance to the planning officer and the IMT as a whole.⁸⁶

Inconsistent information about the wind change was conveyed to firefighters on the ground—in the form of a red flag warning or otherwise. This failure to promptly transmit accurate information about the change meant that firefighters on the ground were exposed to considerable risk during burnovers.

Warnings for communities affected by the fire before the wind change were generally adequate. No warning was issued for the community of Koornalla, however, and the communities of Callignee, Callignee South and Callignee North were inadequately warned about the wind change. After the wind change the Churchill IMT's warnings lacked clarity and priority, and this imposed unnecessary risks on these communities and on firefighters.

If a safety adviser had been appointed at the Churchill IMT this would have sharpened the focus on safety. The absence of such an officer might well have contributed to the late and inaccurate transmission of red flag warnings to some crews on the fire ground. The CFA investigated the burnovers and interviewed affected crew members. But members of the Churchill IMT were not consulted or interviewed during the investigation; nor were they alerted to the conclusions of the investigation before giving evidence to the Commission. Chapter 3 in Volume II discusses firefighter safety in more detail.

Crew on the Churchill fire ground experienced practical difficulties in maintaining log books. The IMT at Traralgon was, however, operating in an office environment and had access to administrative support. While acknowledging that other IMTs might also have failed to maintain adequate records, the Commission considers that the example of the Churchill IMT emphasises the need to record red flag warnings and other life-saving messages in accordance with standard operating procedures.

Communication between the Churchill IMT and Hancock Victorian Plantations was excellent. HVP management is to be commended for its level of preparation for major fires. HVP's crews should be acknowledged for their firefighting efforts on 7 February. Their commitment to protecting the local community—not just their own assets—impressed the Commission. The company lost assets worth tens of millions of dollars in the 7 February fires, including 16,684 hectares of plantation.⁸⁷

Although roadblocks were sought and put in position, concerns were expressed about the manner in which the guidelines were implemented. At a police debrief on 20 March Forward Commander Sergeant Wilson expressed concern about traffic management—including placement of roadblocks allowing free access to areas affected or threatened by fire, suitable designation of roadblocks, and confusion about who should be allowed through. Chapter 2 in Volume II discusses roadblocks in detail.

1 Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Churchill Fire (BOM.901.0001) at 0026

2 Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Churchill Fire (BOM.901.0001) at 0026

3 Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Churchill Fire (BOM.901.0001) at 0026

4 Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Churchill Fire (BOM.901.0001) at 0026

5 Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Churchill Fire (BOM.901.0001) at 0026

6 Exhibit 557 – Meteorological Aspects of the Churchill Fire (BOM.901.0001) at 0045

7 Exhibit 214 – Statement of Hollowood (WIT.3010.001.0338) [68]

8 Exhibit 214 – Statement of Hollowood (WIT.3010.001.0338) [68]

9 Exhibit 215 – Supplementary Statement of Hollowood (WIT.3010.003.0287_R) [23]

- 10 Exhibit 980 – Correspondence – Houses Destroyed – Breakdown by Fire (CORR.1003.0048_R) at 0048_R
- 11 Exhibit 786 – Statement of Clow (WIT.3004.034.0004) [19]
- 12 Exhibit 939 – Details Regarding Emergency Response (CFA.600.005.0195) at 0195, 0198; Exhibit 939 – Day by Day Breakdown – Churchill (DSE.HDD.0048.0545_11); Exhibit 939 – Aircraft Data 0809 (DSE.HDD.0048.0544_20) at 0544_26; Exhibit 425 – Statement of Sewell (WIT.7519.001.0001) [58]–[59]
- 13 Exhibit 994 – Churchill Fire – Fire Spread Map (CFA.600.006.0008)
- 14 Exhibit 408 – Statement of Tainsh (WIT.3024.003.0353) [33], [44]; Exhibit 455 – Statement of Jeremiah (WIT.3024.003.0275) [23]
- 15 Exhibit 389 – Statement of Lockwood (WIT.7520.001.0001) [8], [27]–[28], [40]; Exhibit 408 – Statement of Tainsh (WIT.3024.003.0353) [33]
- 16 Exhibit 408 – Statement of Tainsh (WIT.3024.003.0353) [44]; Exhibit 455 – Statement of Jeremiah (WIT.3024.003.0275) [19]–[20]
- 17 Exhibit 427 – Statement of English (WIT.4008.001.0001) [60], [62], [65]; Exhibit 404 – Statement of Scully (WIT.3010.008.0001) [26]
- 18 Exhibit 127 – Statement of Paterson, Annexure 8 (WIT.3004.010.1057)
- 19 Exhibit 408 – Statement of Tainsh (WIT.3024.003.0353) [66]; Exhibit 455 – Statement of Jeremiah (WIT.3024.003.0275) [28]
- 20 Exhibit 455 – Statement of Jeremiah (WIT.3024.003.0275) [28]; Jeremiah T10187:4–T10187:13
- 21 Exhibit 395 – Statement of Gillham (WIT.3024.004.0069) [8], [33]; Exhibit 400 – Statement of Kennedy (WIT.3024.003.0294) [11], [29]; Exhibit 401 – Statement of Mitchell (WIT.3024.003.0315_R) [8], [18]; Exhibit 389 – Statement of Lockwood (WIT.7520.001.0001) [62]; Exhibit 393 – Statement of Pridgeon (WIT.3024.004.0110) [26], [32]; Exhibit 396 – Statement of Hunter (WIT.3004.018.0287) [4]; Exhibit 397 – Statement of Oldroyd (WIT.3004.018.0230) [3], [6], [14]; Gillham T9386:13–T9386:20; Jeremiah T10195:20–T10195:22; Sewell T9716:10–T9717:12
- 22 Exhibit 388 – Statement of Keating, Annexure 1 (WIT.3004.018.0009) at 0009; Sewell T9722:18–T9722:20
- 23 Exhibit 548 – Correspondence – Safety Advisors (CORR.0911.0107_R)
- 24 Exhibit 388 – Statement of Keating, Annexure 1 (WIT.3004.018.0009) at 0009, (WIT.3004.018.0080) at 0080, 0093; Sewell T9722:12–T9722:20
- 25 Exhibit 413 – Statement of O’Toole (WIT.3024.004.0165) [33], [36]; Exhibit 417 – Statement of Mongan (WIT.3004.018.0216) [30]; O’Toole T9557:18–T9557:27
- 26 Exhibit 425 – Statement of Sewell, Appendix 10 (HVP.004.001.0001); Sewell T9728:13–T9728:18, T9729:20–T9729:30
- 27 Exhibit 388 – Statement of Keating, Annexure 1 (WIT.3004.018.0009) at 0010
- 28 Exhibit 415 – Statement of Barling (WIT.3004.017.0304) [20]–[22]; Exhibit 417 – Statement of Mongan (WIT.3004.018.0216) [26]; Exhibit 413 – Statement of O’Toole (WIT.3024.004.0165) [58]; O’Toole T9565:6–T9565:14
- 29 Exhibit 415 – Statement of Barling (WIT.3004.017.0304) [27]
- 30 Exhibit 389 – Statement of Lockwood (WIT.7520.001.0001) [47]–[48]
- 31 Exhibit 387 – Chronology of Major Events – Churchill Fire (TEN.106.001.0001) at 0001–0035; Exhibit 191 – Statement of Graystone, Annexure 5 (WIT.3026.001.0094) at 0102
- 32 Exhibit 415 – Statement of Barling (WIT.3004.017.0304) [30]; Exhibit 398 – Statement of Wilson (WIT.3010.009.0147) [20]–[21], [26]
- 33 Exhibit 388 – Statement of Keating, Annexure 1 (WIT.3004.018.0009) at 0010
- 34 Exhibit 417 – Statement of Mongan (WIT.3004.018.0216) [35]–[37]; Exhibit 415 – Statement of Barling (WIT.3004.017.0304) [24]; Exhibit 388 – Statement of Keating, Annexure 1 (WIT.3004.018.0009) at 0010
- 35 Exhibit 427 – Statement of English (WIT.4008.001.0001) [64]–[65]; Exhibit 404 – Statement of Scully (WIT.3010.008.0001) [26]
- 36 Exhibit 388 – Statement of Keating, Annexure 1 (WIT.3004.018.0009) at 0010, 0013
- 37 Exhibit 408 – Statement of Tainsh (WIT.3024.003.0353) [66]; Exhibit 455 – Statement of Jeremiah (WIT.3024.003.0275) [26]–[28]
- 38 Exhibit 455 – Statement of Jeremiah (WIT.3024.003.0275) [7]–[9]; Exhibit 389 – Statement of Lockwood (WIT.7520.001.0001) [8]; Lockwood T9201:25–T9203:14; Barca T3465:20–T3465:25
- 39 B Teague, R McLeod, S Pascoe, *2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission*, Interim Report, Parliament of Victoria, Melbourne, August 2009, Recommendation 9.2; Exhibit 547 – Statement of Haynes (WIT.3004.023.0011) [160]
- 40 Exhibit 389 – Statement of Lockwood (WIT.7520.001.0001) [62]; Exhibit 455 – Statement of Jeremiah (WIT.3024.003.0275) [56]; Exhibit 548 – Standard Operating Procedure – Safety Advisors (CORR.0911.0109); Haynes T12050:25–T12051:2
- 41 Exhibit 388 – Statement of Keating, Annexure 1 (WIT.3004.018.0009) at 0013
- 42 Exhibit 455 – Statement of Jeremiah, Annexure 3 (DSE.0029.0256.0015); Exhibit 393 – Statement of Pridgeon (WIT.3024.004.0110) [27]–[29], [37]; Pridgeon T9345:21–T9348:31, T9350:2–T9350:31
- 43 Exhibit 389 – Statement of Lockwood (WIT.7520.001.0001) [67]; Exhibit 427 – Statement of English (WIT.4008.001.0001) [75]; Exhibit 428 – Statement of Adams (WIT.4009.001.0001) [46]–[47], [51], Annexure 6 (WIT.4009.001.0273) at 0275
- 44 Exhibit 388 – Statement of Keating, Annexure 1 (WIT.3004.018.0009) at 0013
- 45 Exhibit 417 – Statement of Mongan (WIT.3004.018.0216) [41], [43]–[46]; Exhibit 388 – Statement of Keating, Annexure 1 (WIT.3004.018.0009) at 0013
- 46 Exhibit 403 – Spot Fire Weather Forecast (EXH.403.0002); Exhibit 455 – Statement of Jeremiah, Annexure 4 (DSE.0029.0256.0016) at 0016; Gillham T9395:7–T9395:30
- 47 Exhibit 388 – Statement of Keating, Annexure 1 (WIT.3004.018.0009) at 0013–0014
- 48 Exhibit 411 – Statement of Taylor (WIT.3024.004.0001) [80]–[90]; Exhibit 409 – Statement of Stamkos (WIT.3024.003.0329) [73]–[82]; Exhibit 410 – Statement of Walpole (WIT.3004.018.0345) [10]–[40]; Exhibit 412 – Statement of Mynard (WIT.3004.018.0101) [57]
- 49 Sewell T9716:31–T9717:4
- 50 Sewell T9717:5–T9717:9

- 51 Exhibit 425 – Statement of Sewell (WIT.7519.001.0001) [14], [18]–[19]; Sewell T9715:13–T9715:30
- 52 Exhibit 425 – Statement of Sewell (WIT.7519.001.0001) [44], [93]
- 53 Exhibit 425 – Statement of Sewell (WIT.7519.001.0001) [56], Appendix 10 (HVP.004.001.0001); Sewell T9728:13–T9728:18, T9729:20–T9729:30
- 54 Exhibit 425 – Statement of Sewell (WIT.7519.001.0001) [56]
- 55 Exhibit 389 – Statement of Lockwood (WIT.7520.001.0001) [77]; Lockwood T9200:2–T9200:4
- 56 Exhibit 413 – Statement of O’Toole (WIT.3024.004.0165) [70], [71]; O’Toole T9567:1–T9567:18, T9567:26–T9567:27, T9568:5–T9568:25
- 57 Exhibit 388 – Statement of Keating, Annexure 1 (WIT.3004.018.0009) at 0014
- 58 Exhibit 388 – Statement of Keating, Annexure 1 (WIT.3004.018.0009) at 0014–0015; Keating T9193:10–T9194:19; Exhibit 4 – Supplementary Statement of Rees (WIT.004.002.0001) [85]–[88]; Gillham T9395:29–T9395:30, T9405:4–T9405:20, T9406:11–T9406:28, T9409:6–T9409:10, T9414:2–T9414:7
- 59 Exhibit 4 – Supplementary Statement of Rees (WIT.004.002.0001) [88]; Exhibit 294 – Interactive Presentation – INTMEN 001827 (EXH.294.0001); Exhibit 296 – Interactive Presentation – INTMEN 001828 (EXH.296.0001); Exhibit 297 – Interactive Presentation – INTMEN 001841 (EXH.297.0001); Exhibit 298 – Interactive Presentation – INTMEN 001787 (EXH.298.0001); Exhibit 299 – Interactive Presentation – INTMEN 002059 (EXH.299.0001); Exhibit 300 – Interactive Presentation – INTMEN 001788 (EXH.300.0001); Exhibit 388 – Statement of Keating, Annexure 1 (WIT.3004.018.0009) at 0014–0015
- 60 Exhibit 388 – Statement of Keating, Annexure 1 (WIT.3004.018.0009) at 0014–0015; Keating T9196:15–T9196:28
- 61 Exhibit 389 – Investigation Report Glengarry West Tanker 1 (CFA.001.026.0138) at 0146; Wood T9753:26–T9754:9
- 62 Exhibit 389 – Investigation Report Glengarry West Tanker 1 (CFA.001.026.0138) at 0146; Chesterton T9682:2–T9682:3
- 63 Exhibit 418 – Statement of Chesterton (SUMM.044.003.1345) at 1349; Chesterton T9679:24–T9680:3
- 64 Exhibit 418 – Statement of Chesterton (WIT.3004.018.0353) [14]–[17]
- 65 Exhibit 389 – Investigation Report Glengarry West Tanker 1 (CFA.001.026.0138) at 0147; Exhibit 417 – Statement of Mongan (WIT.3004.018.0216) [54]
- 66 Exhibit 389 – Statement of Lockwood (WIT.7520.001.0001) [80]; Exhibit 400 – Statement of Kennedy (WIT.3024.003.0294) [71]
- 67 Exhibit 388 – Statement of Keating, Annexure 1 (WIT.3004.018.0009) at 0015
- 68 Exhibit 4 – Supplementary Statement of Rees (WIT.004.002.0001) [89]
- 69 Exhibit 4 – Supplementary Statement of Rees (WIT.004.002.0001) [90]; Exhibit 388 – Statement of Keating, Annexure 1 (WIT.3004.018.0009) at 0015
- 70 Exhibit 427 – Statement of English (WIT.4008.001.0001) [67], [76]; Exhibit 404 – Statement of Scully (WIT.3010.008.0001) [30]
- 71 Exhibit 786 – Statement of Clow (WIT.3004.034.0004) [19]; Exhibit 980 – Correspondence – Houses Destroyed – Breakdown by Fire (CORR.1003.0048_R) at 0048_R; Exhibit 214 – Statement of Hollowood (WIT.3010.001.0338) [68]
- 72 Exhibit 475 – AllMS Manual (TEN.121.001.0001) at 0088; Submissions of the State – Churchill Fire (RESP.3000.005.0075) [49]; Kennedy T9482:3–T9482:6
- 73 Exhibit 546 – Linton Report (TEN.132.001.0001) at 0386
- 74 Barling T9590:2–T9590:28
- 75 Exhibit 11 – Statement of Esplin, Attachment 2 (WIT.005.001.0123) at 0184
- 76 Exhibit 400 – Statement of Kennedy (WIT.3024.003.0294) [48]; Kennedy T9466:2–T9466:12; Mitchell T9495:8–T9495:12
- 77 Barling T9593:12–T9594:13; Kennedy T9485:1–T9485:18
- 78 Exhibit 387 – Chronology of Major Events – Churchill Fire (TEN.106.001.0001) at 0023; Exhibit 2 – IMS Data (WIT.004.002.1459) at 1488; Exhibit 403 – Spot Fire Weather Forecast (DSE.0028.0248.0216); Exhibit 389 – Statement of Lockwood (WIT.7520.001.0001) [48], [67], [73]–[74], Annexure 13 (WIT.7520.001.0115), Annexure 16 (WIT.7520.001.0124) at 0126; Exhibit 411 – Statement of Taylor (WIT.3024.004.0001) [99], Annexure 2 (DSE.0078.0639.0123_R) at 0129_R; Exhibit 400 – Statement of Kennedy (WIT.3024.003.0294) [66]; Exhibit 415 – Statement of Barling (WIT.3004.017.0304) [42]; Barling T9598:6–T9599:10; Lockwood T9212:13–T9212:17, T9236:9–T9236:12, T9297:2–T9297:14; Gillham T9391:28–T9392:10
- 79 Exhibit 22 – Statement of Williams, Annexure 1 (WIT.013.001.0012) at 0074; Submissions of Counsel Assisting the 2009 Bushfires Royal Commission, (SUBM.202.008.0001) [2.37]
- 80 Exhibit 389 – Statement of Lockwood (WIT.7520.001.0001) [63]; Exhibit 417 – Statement of Mongan (WIT.3004.018.0216) [67]; Exhibit 415 – Statement of Barling (WIT.3004.017.0304) [38]–[40]; Exhibit 413 – Statement of O’Toole (WIT.3024.004.0165) [48]–[50]; Barling T9596:19–T9597:13
- 81 Exhibit 389 – Statement of Lockwood, Annexure 16 (CFA.001.026.0171_R) at 0190_R
- 82 Submissions of Counsel Assisting the 2009 Bushfires Royal Commission, (SUBM.202.008.0001) [7.33]–[7.52]
- 83 Exhibit 394 – Statement of Demetrios (WIT.079.001.0001_R) [29]–[31]; Exhibit 576 – Statement of Murphy (WIT.3006.001.0263) [16]; Exhibit 136 – Letter from Metropolitan Fire and Emergency Services Board To Counsel Assisting the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission (TEN.051.001.0001) at 0002; Keating T9187:24–T9187:29
- 84 Exhibit 389 – Statement of Lockwood (WIT.7520.001.0001) [52]; Exhibit 394 – Statement of Demetrios (WIT.079.001.0001_R) [11]
- 85 Wood T9776:11–T9777:7, T9785:22–T9785:25
- 86 Exhibit 393 – Statement of Pridgeon (WIT.3024.004.0110) [29]; Pridgeon T9358:25–T9359:3
- 87 Exhibit 425 – Statement of Sewell (WIT.7519.001.0001) [77]