

**OPENING REMARKS – PRELIMINARY HEARING
CHAIRMAN OF THE VICTORIAN BUSHFIRES ROYAL COMMISSION
20 APRIL 2009**

Why did the bushfires of 7 February 2009 in Victoria take so many human lives? Why were those bushfires so extreme, so feral, so catastrophic, so devastating? What can be done to ensure that so many lives are not lost, that so much devastation is not caused, in such bushfires in the future?

Those are but some of the questions that we, and you, will want to have answered.

We have extremely wide terms of reference. There are many issues that we could investigate. Which issues are the most important? Which issues are the ones we should most urgently address?

We have deadlines. For an interim report, it is 17 August 2009. For our final report, it is 31 July 2010. We plan to meet those deadlines. We can only do so by limiting the issues that we address, and by dealing with the more critical issues first. Our focus will be primarily on issues that will address how a better and safer environment can be created for Victorian communities. Our focus will be generally on how to limit the devastation of any future intense bushfires and specifically on how to save human lives.

We have had 26 community consultations. The consultations have been valuable in many ways. They have reinforced our awareness of the immense efforts of fire-fighters and other providers of relief, whether professionals or volunteers. The consultations have enabled us to listen to many stories of heartbreak and distress. They have helped us to see what issues are dear to the hearts, and at the front of the minds, of those most affected by the fires.

We have received many submissions. We hope to receive many more. Details of how to put in a submission are on our web site. Our approach to handling such submissions is explained in advance on our web site.

We still have to hear evidence. We have open minds.

We have received many applications for leave to appear. Our approach to handling such applications was explained in advance on our web site. It does seem to have been misunderstood by some people. We have granted general leave to a limited number of applicants. Some other applicants will have leave to appear only as to particular issues.

Many applicants have not been granted leave. If you are one of those, we encourage you to focus in the short term on providing a detailed written submission. There are other ways of permitting you to air facts and voice opinions than by your having a formal right to appear at hearings. The best starting point is for you to provide a compelling written submission if you have not already done so. We urge you to make it so valuable that Mr Jack Rush, Senior Counsel assisting the Commission, or ultimately the Commission, will consider it necessary to call you to give evidence.

Before calling on Mr Rush, our final words are as to openness. To the greatest extent reasonably possible, the work of the Royal Commission will be open. Most specifically, the full hearings will routinely be web cast – that is streamed through the internet – just as this preliminary hearing is being web cast. We will be seen and heard in many places. Most importantly, our hearings will be seen and heard in fire-affected communities around Victoria.

We now call on Mr Rush.