

Closing remarks—end of hearings
Commissioner Bernard Teague, Chairperson
2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission
27 May 2010

Today marks the end of the hearings for the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission.

The Commission was established on 16 February 2009. That was 9 days after the bushfires which devastated Victoria. They caused the deaths of 173 people and substantial property, environmental and other losses.

The Commission's first day of hearing was on 20 April 2009. Since then we have held 155 days of hearings across five venues, including three regional venues. Twenty three of those days covered the 173 fire-related deaths. We have looked at the causes and circumstances of 13 fires. We have heard from 434 witnesses, including two expert panels and 100 lay witnesses. We have received over 990 exhibits and produced over 20,000 pages of transcript. We have explored a wide range of topics to assist in the development of our recommendations. We have shared our hearings with the community generally through our web-casting

We have issued two interim reports. The first was delivered on 17 August 2009. It contained 51 recommendations on issues that the Commission considered should be addressed urgently, prior to the last fire season. The second was delivered on 24 November 2009. It was a special report on building, with 7 recommendations.

The hearings have not been the only part of our work. The Commission began its work visiting the communities most affected by the fires. We attended 14 communities. We took part in 26 community consultation sessions. They were invaluable in providing us with early insight into the issues of importance to the people most closely affected by the fires. We arranged a public submissions process and through it we received nearly 1700 submissions. Those submissions have informed all of our work, in ways such as the scope of our inquiries and witness selection.

The hearings have relied upon the skill and hard work of many people inside and outside the Commission. Many outside organisations and individuals have had to bear a heavy burden to service us. We need to thank so many people. Some are here today, but most are not. Many we will be able to thank personally, but many we will not. Right now, to keep these final remarks tolerably short, we will name no names.

First, we thank those not here. We particularly thank the witnesses who appeared before us. We thank those who helped prepare the invaluable witness statements. We thank the people who generously participated in our community consultations. We thank those who provided us with submissions through our public submissions process and there are many others no doubt, like those who provided paintings for our gallery.

Secondly, we thank those who are here to whom we must say farewell today. We thank those lawyers and others, at the bar table and elsewhere in the hearing room, who have worked on written and oral submissions. We thank our long-term media star attenders for their professional approach and for respecting the protocols agreed to at the start of our hearings.

Thirdly, we mention those who are part of the Commission team. We will see more of all of you in the hectic months or weeks at least prior to the delivery of our Final Report. We will be able to thank you more warmly and fully. We thank Counsel Assisting. We thank the Commission's solicitors, Corrs Chambers Westgarth. We thank the staff of the Commission led so ably by our CEO. We thank our researchers, our tipstaves, our in-hearing support, administration and IT staff. We thank all of the contractors who have provided a range of services, from IT support and information management to security. We thank our hearing room operators, e.law, and the ever present transcription team.

We will now concentrate on our Final Report. It is due to be delivered to the Victorian Governor by 31 July. The Governor will then present the report to the Premier. The Premier will determine the timing of its release, by tabling the report in the Victorian Parliament.

Copies of the report will be made available through the Victorian Government. It will also be available on the Commission's website. If you wish to obtain a copy of the Final Report, contact Information Victoria to register your interest. The Commission will not be making any comments, prior to its delivery, about its likely conclusions or recommendations.

I do want to acknowledge one more group. Before I do so, I invite Mr Rush to make some penultimate remarks.

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The final group that we acknowledge are the families and friends of the people who died in the terrible bushfires of 7 February 2009. We have been conscious of your pain and loss throughout our work. We hope that the work undertaken through and by the Commission will assist in preventing a future tragedy of the scale of Black Saturday. We have never lost sight of one thing. The key reason for this Commission was the deaths of your 173 loved ones.

Our final act will be to honour and remember the 173 who died with a minute's silence.