

**Opening remarks—2010 hearings  
Commissioner Bernard Teague, Chairperson  
2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission  
1 February 2010**

Today is the first day of the Commission's hearings for 2010. We are profoundly relieved that we have not seen a repeat of the conditions of 7 February 2009 to date this fire season. Clearly the season is far from over; we must all continue to be vigilant and informed about fire risk over coming months and indeed years.

This coming Sunday is the first anniversary of that terrible day. Our thoughts are particularly with the individuals and communities who lost loved ones, were injured in the fires and suffered property and other losses. Our thoughts are also with the fire and emergency services personnel who assisted in the fire fighting and community protection efforts and those who continue to help with community recovery and rebuilding.

The anniversary will be a difficult time for all those affected by the events of 7 February. The State of Victoria has expressed concerns about the possible impact on those affected by the fires of holding hearings in the lead-up to the anniversary. The Commission had already made a number of scheduling decisions to minimise any distress that its processes might cause during this anniversary period. They have included ensuring that no witnesses are required this week and scheduling the next block of hearings into the fire-related deaths in March. This plan was made in recognition of how difficult February will be, particularly for the family and friends of those who died. In response to the State's concerns, the Commission has now made further adjustments to the order of matters under consideration this week. We will only run hearings from Monday to Wednesday.

This week we will be hearing oral submissions about the origin and the course of each of the significant fires which burned on or around 7 February 2009. The oral submissions from Counsel Assisting the Commission and other parties who choose to speak will conclude the hearings with respect to individual fires.

Next week we will commence our consideration of the remaining significant topics that will be explored in detail by the Commission. First up is planning. Starting on 8 February, the Commission will spend over a week considering planning issues. This follows on from the Commission's earlier consideration of the related topic of building. The hearing will include a forum of experts.

After that, the Commission will move onto the much debated topic of fuel reduction. This will take some time. The hearings will also include an expert forum. Issues to do with roadside clearing will follow, then insurance. The Commission will then revisit the stay or go policy. We will take into account the measures that have been put into place by Governments and communities since February 2009 and since the Commission's first interim report in August last year.

In early April the Commission will briefly consider recovery issues. In late April the Commission will consider the important topic of institutional arrangements and organisational structures. This topic will include consideration of the individual structure of the key fire and emergency agencies, the relationship between those agencies, the overarching governance arrangements across the whole sector. Our aim is to determine what would serve Victoria best.

The Commission has been careful about the timing of consideration of this particularly sensitive topic. It would not have been constructive to canvass organisational issues immediately prior to or during the fire season when it may have distracted the fire services from their core business. Furthermore, a number of experts are continuing to work on organisational issues and require time to fully explore them and come up with their recommendations. Those recommendations are due in early April.

Finally, the Commission is well aware of the significant cost implications, both financial and personal, of any change to the existing organisational structures. Any changes in this area must be the result of informed, careful consideration of all of the ramifications that could result from such changes.

The Commission has a large agenda of work still to be undertaken. This in turn means a lot of other organisations, including the fire and emergency services organisations, have a lot of work to do in preparing material for the Commission. The Commission acknowledges this workload and appreciates the timely provision of material by the parties before it.

The Commission intends to finish hearing evidence in mid May. The Commissioners will then privately consider our views, after considering the evidence and submissions from Counsel Assisting and the parties. We will then determine our recommendations for the Final Report, which we will deliver to the Governor on 31 July 2010, the due date.

As always, the hearings are open to the public. They will in the main be webstreamed. Transcripts of the proceedings are also available daily.

We encourage anyone who is interested to attend the hearings and to take some time to look around the gallery of children's art work we currently have on display in our foyer. This work is from children who live in communities affected by the fires. We would like to thank the schools for their involvement and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development for their assistance in putting together this engaging and moving exhibition.