

## John Brumby discusses the results of this week's interim report from the Bushfires Royal Commission

Reporter: Jane Cowan

TAMARA OUDYN, PRESENTER: The Victorian Premier is standing by his embattled fire chief, even after a damning assessment of the fire services in this week's interim report from the Royal Commission. The Royal Commissioners say Russell Rees overlooked fire prediction expertise to the point where it was difficult to understand how he could properly carry out a strategic state-wide coordination. To discuss this and other matters arising from the report, Royal Commission reporter Jane Cowan spoke to John Brumby in Castlemaine.

JANE COWAN, REPORTER: Well, Premier, you've repeatedly said that Victorians couldn't have expected more from the fire leadership on Black Saturday. But when the commissioners have found that the CFA was in possession of information early in the afternoon and failed in its core responsibility to properly warn the public, doesn't your endorsement fly in the face of the evidence?

JOHN BRUMBY, PREMIER OF VICTORIA: I don't think so. I think what the Commission says, as I read it in the interim report, is that they made some preliminary observations and they need to test them further. I don't think you should draw conclusions on that matter until they get to the final report.

JANE COWAN: People like Joan Davey who lost her entire family in on Bald Spur Road in Kinglake, they say to hear you say that Victorians couldn't have expected more from the fire leadership actually compounds the hurt they are already feeling.

JOHN BRUMBY: Well, I met Joan Davey. I saw her at the remembrance service late in February. I wrote her a note recently and I understand the extraordinary pain she is going through. I made those comments about the CFA and their leadership because as I moved around the state, I believe what I said was correct in terms of the effort that people put in.

JANE COWAN: When asked about the leadership of Russell Rees, before the interim report came out, you said "let's wait for the interim report". Now it's come out, it is critical of Russell Rees and you say that they are only preliminary observations. Does that mean if the same criticism is contained in the final report, you will then see fit to withdraw your support for Russell Rees?

JOHN BRUMBY: Well, I think that's a hypothetical question and I can't answer that. I don't know what will be in the final report. But what I do know is we needed this year to get on with the job of preparing for the next fire season, which, as we speak, is 68 days away. It was the CFA's board's view that they needed the continuity to be able to plan forward, put in place the measures and operations to make our state as safe as possible.

JANE COWAN: There's been recognition that there were system failures. Systems don't create themselves. Don't the leaders who presided over those systems and created them have to take responsibility for the failure?

JOHN BRUMBY: Well, the systems were designed within certain parameters. The systems were designed for the normal sort of years we see in Victoria and across Australia.

JANE COWAN: So you don't accept that many of the failures were so basic that they've got nothing to do with the scale of the threat on that day? That the messaging was bad and ambiguous and would have been the case regardless. You don't accept that?

JOHN BRUMBY: What I accept is that I've set up a Royal Commission to look at all of the facts...

JANE COWAN: But this is what they found.

JOHN BRUMBY: ...to look at all of the facts and circumstances and to advise on that. The purpose of advising on that is so that our Government can make the appropriate changes, if required, to make the state safer going forward.

JANE COWAN: One argument that is often advanced in response to criticism of the CFA is that it will demoralise volunteers to say that. But anyone who sat in the Commission every day can see that the criticism has never been directed at the firefighters on the ground. Any criticism has always been about policy and about the leadership. Why do you perpetuate that myth that to criticise the CFA is to criticise the people on the ground? That's not helpful is it?

JOHN BRUMBY: Well, again I reject the basis of your question and I just wouldn't accept the hypothesis that you are putting. You see, the reality is for every person who serves in the CFA, from people who are on the back of the truck to people driving the truck, through to the people in the incident control centres, through to the chief fire officer, they all have to make decisions, crucial decisions, sometimes life-and-death decisions, in the course of their duties. They all know what it is like. On the day in question, I think that everybody in the field I've spoken to hundreds of them in the incident control centres, and in the control command, gave more than 100 per cent. The hotspots, the most potentially dangerous were the Dandenongs, Macedons and the Otways. And when that fire got underway at Ferntree Gully, if that had been allowed to run, it would have destroyed the Dandenongs. Given the speed at which fires were travelling that day, it was 2 o'clock in the afternoon when they started to contain that fire. It could've, **it could've**

destroyed thousands of houses and taken hundreds if not thousands, of lives. We will never know that. That's the point. We will never know that. We know we lost lives, tragically, on February 7, but we don't know what the alternative might have been if decisions hadn't been taken to deploy resources which put out fires which could have taken hundreds of lives. We'll never know that.

JANE COWAN: Everyone is obviously hoping that this season isn't as bad as is predicted, but if it is, can you guarantee with the changes you are putting in place now that none of the system failures identified in the interim report will happen again?

JOHN BRUMBY: I can guarantee that the state will be better prepared than it ever has been. I can guarantee that. I can guarantee that there will be a widespread education campaign to make sure that all Victorians understand the potential threat that we are facing. I can guarantee those things. But I can't guarantee that every single system is going to work 100 per cent of the time. I will tell you why I say that. I say that because I've been out in the field. I've seen some of the Telstra communications towers, which built to a specification to withstand any bushfire that ever passed through and I've seen them melted. They melted because the fires on February 7 went way beyond the specifications that any engineers had ever considered. I can't guarantee all the Telstra facilities, I can't guarantee all the Commonwealth communication facilities. I can't guarantee each and every one of those things. What I can guarantee is that in terms of resources, in terms of the policy direction, in terms of the partnership with the people of Victoria, I don't think we will be ever better-prepared than we will be this fire season.

JANE COWAN: Thanks for talking to Stateline.

JOHN BRUMBY: Thank you.