

The CHAIR: *I will ask a couple of questions and then I'll pass to my colleagues. I am looking at some of the data from your website. In 2023, you attended more than 1,700 incidents. How many of them would have been road incidents, compared to other incidents?*

	2023-24	2024-25
No. Volunteers	1147	1364
Hours of volunteering	19832.17	22623.14
Hours of training	22317.67	26283.3
No. of Rescues	2250	3055

The percentage of Rescues that are road crash related vary from year to year. It is normally 40-50% of total rescues performed.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: *Please feel free to take this on notice but, ultimately, this Committee will be making recommendations to government. I'm just wondering, if you were writing it, what would be the top three recommendations that you'd be making that you would want this Committee to make in relation to your organisation to government that are relevant to this area? Again, feel free to take that on notice.*

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: *That's ultimately what we'll be doing. If you wish to sneak a fourth one in, that's fine too. But what I'm looking for is that it is important that we know precisely what you want and precisely the message that you want us to give to government. Please take it on notice and come back to us and the Committee secretariat will be in touch with the details.*

Protecting Communities in the REZ: VRA Rescue NSW – The Unfunded Backbone of Renewable Energy Emergency Response

As the NSW Government delivers the nation's most ambitious Renewable Energy Zone (REZ) strategy, it is building new risk into the landscape: more remote infrastructure, more transport movements, more exposure to extreme weather, and more need for 24/7 specialist emergency response.

In many of the affected regions Dubbo, Coolah, Mudgee, Gulgong, Mendooran and beyond the only accredited general land rescue agency is VRA Rescue NSW.

We receive no guaranteed funding, no inclusion in the REZ risk planning framework, and have been excluded entirely from REZ linked community asset investment despite being expected to protect lives, land, and infrastructure when disaster strikes.

1. Create a Dedicated REZ Emergency Services Fund with Guaranteed Access for VRA Rescue NSW

The Central West Orana REZ and other planned zones have the real potential to dramatically increase the emergency response burden on already stretched rural services. In 2025 alone, VRA Rescue NSW Squads have experienced a 36% rise in operational taskings, yet not a single dollar has been earmarked to support our critical role in affected areas.

We Recommend:

- Establishment of a REZ Emergency Services Support Fund within EnergyCo or the Department of Planning, with:
- Dedicated eligibility for VRA Rescue NSW infrastructure, vehicles, and equipment
- A minimum allocation of \$1M per REZ to upgrade volunteer response capability in affected zones

Why it matters:

REZ developers are mandated to deliver community benefit, yet they currently rely on unfunded, volunteer-based rescue units to mitigate growing and foreseeable risks associated with heavy transport, turbine construction, remote operations, and extreme weather.

VRA Rescue NSW is one of the most cost-effective emergency services in the country.

An independent 2025 economic analysis found that every \$1 invested in VRA Rescue NSW returns between \$25 and \$80 in measurable public value — including avoided hospital costs, reduced fatalities, faster recovery times, and economic continuity in affected communities.

A modest \$1 million allocation from REZ funding would yield tens of millions in direct and indirect community benefit, reduce project downtime during incidents, and ensure the safety of workers and residents alike.

To ignore this need while placing new pressures on volunteer emergency services is to build systemic risk into the REZ model by design and erode public confidence in its safety, integrity, and sustainability.

However, investing in VRA Rescue NSW now will deliver a lasting corporate and social legacy one where communities remember that clean energy infrastructure was built not just with environmental foresight, but with respect for local safety, resilience, and volunteer service at its core.

2. Fund REZ Specific Rescue Vehicles and Vertical Rescue Equipment

REZ zones involve high access structures (e.g. wind turbines), remote access roads, and high traffic construction corridors all requiring specialist rescue capability.

We Recommend:

Immediate funding for:

- 4WD all access rescue vehicles suitable for REZ terrain
- Vertical rescue kits (harnesses, rope systems, haul kits, turbine access gear)
- Trailer based response modules prepositioned in REZ hubs (e.g. Gulgong, Mendooran)

Why it matters:

The potential demand is real, rising, and unavoidable. As Renewable Energy Zones expand, so too will the scale, complexity, and risk of emergency incidents from road crashes and remote site injuries to vertical rescues and severe weather impacts.

VRA Rescue NSW will absorb this growing operational load, and doing so without resourcing, consultation, or investment.

Failing to fund this capacity now is not just oversight it is future failure preprogrammed into the REZ model. In contrast, a modest investment in VRA Rescue NSW leaves a legacy: one of foresight, fairness, and shared responsibility between industry, government, and the communities that host the State's energy future.

3. Fund Targeted REZ Specific Rescue Training for VRA Rescue NSW & and other Emergency Rescue Agencies

The complexity of incidents emerging from REZ development — including turbine related rescues, large vehicle rollovers, entrapments, and remote casualty management — requires highly specialised skills that go beyond general rescue training.

We Recommend:

A dedicated REZ linked training budget for VRA Rescue NSW to deliver:

- Vertical rescue and tower recovery training
- Remote casualty care and extraction
- Confined space and industrial rescue modules

- Scenario based drills aligned to REZ infrastructure and access risks

Why it matters:

REZ environments pose unique risks high structures, vast geography, and limited site access. The ability to respond safely and effectively depends on purpose-built training, delivered before the first serious incident occurs. Investing in training now prevents avoidable injury, liability, and response delays later.

4. Fund Multi Agency Exercises Led by VRA Rescue NSW in Renewable Energy Zones (REZ)

The rapid development of Renewable Energy Zones (REZ) across rural NSW introduces new operational hazards including increased road traffic, turbine access risks, fire grounds, and remote site isolation. Local responders must be prepared for complex incidents involving multiple agencies, new technologies, and unfamiliar terrain.

VRA Rescue NSW is uniquely placed — with the footprint, specialist capability, and local knowledge — to lead multiagency exercises in these areas.

We recommend:

REZ community benefit funding be allocated to:

- Fund multiagency exercises coordinated and led by VRA Rescue NSW
- Cover costs of planning, logistics, equipment use, fuel, and volunteer resourcing
- Include participation from rescue agencies, councils, contractors, and REZ infrastructure operators
- Support VRA Rescue NSW to develop and deliver:
 - scenario based training modules (e.g. turbine extrication, rural road pileup, remote medical evacuation)
- Joint operational debriefs and post incident reviews for shared learning

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: *In terms of the mental health support for your volunteers, what's available now? Have there been any offers from government of increased mental health support for your volunteers if you've got more jobs?*

Current Support Available:

VRA Rescue NSW currently provides access to mental health support through:

- **Volunteer Peer Support Officers** across regions, who offer a first point of contact for volunteers in need of confidential support or referral.
- **RFS Member Assistance Program (MAP)** access for eligible members, providing short-term counselling and wellbeing services, (unofficial arrangement with RFS NSW)
- **RFS Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM)** processes following high-impact incidents, including defusing and debriefings facilitated by trained personnel. (unofficial arrangement with RFS NSW)
- **Ongoing education and awareness** about mental health and wellbeing at leadership briefings and forums, such as the Captain's Forum and training programs.

Government Offers and Funding:

At present, **there have been no specific or formal offers from government for increased mental health support** linked to the rising number of incidents or operational deployments. We continue to advocate for greater recognition and resourcing in this area, particularly as operational tempo increases with more frequent natural disasters and emergencies.

The CHAIR: *Just before you put your farmer hat on, has your organisation identified any other specific training or upgrades that you will need to do to deal with incidences on the REZ in terms of hazardous materials et cetera? Is there anything in that space?*

We currently do not know what hazardous materials are involved in the construction and running of REZ projects and infrastructure. This is of concern for us and has been one of the main reasons that we should have been involved in early consultation stages of the REZ as a whole and of individual projects. We do sincerely hope that channels will open up to ensure we can put plans in place that best serves the community and workforce.

