

## Statement from the Mayor - ESVF

Late last night, the Victorian Government passed its controversial Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund (ESVF) following last-minute deals with crossbench MPs. This new fund – or tax, as it should rightly be called – will unfairly impact regional Victoria, particularly our farmers, who will bear a disproportionate share of the tax burden.

Let me be clear: South Gippsland Shire Council strongly supports our emergency services. We recognise the vital role they play in keeping communities safe. However, we do not support a funding model that unfairly targets country Victorians. Rather than shifting costs onto ratepayers, the Victorian Government should prioritise its spending and fund emergency services through consolidated revenue.

While negotiations with the crossbench delivered a few modest concessions – including a token reduction in the rate increase for primary producers from an exorbitant 189 per cent to a still excessive 150 per cent – this is cold comfort for regional communities already doing it tough.

A large number of emergency service members – many of whom are primary producers – are voicing their dissatisfaction with the new tax. South Gippsland Shire Council stands with them. Under this legislation, local councils will be responsible for collecting this tax via rates notices – effectively making us the government's reluctant tax collectors.

In an effort to provide some relief for primary producers, this year's draft Council budget has proposed to reduce agricultural rates by lowering the farm differential from 70 to 65 per cent. While this won't undo the damage of the new levy, it's a step toward supporting our farmers during what has already been one of the driest autumns on record.

This new tax may be well-intentioned, but for country Victoria, it's yet another blow. We deserve better.

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