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South-west Victorian fire tower on Mount Warrnambool at centre of dispute

[ABC South West Vic](#)

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The fire tower on Mount Warrnambool looks out across south-west Victoria. *(ABC South West Victoria: Matt Neal)*

A tower that played a vital role during the Ash Wednesday disaster in 1983 has become embroiled in a battle between three organisations on the eve of the fire season.

Key points:

- The Mount Warrnambool fire tower was built in the 1970s
- The ownership of the tower has been called into question
- The tower needs significant repairs

The Mount Warrnambool tower, about 25 kilometres north-east of Warrnambool, is manned sporadically during the fire danger period.

It's seen by the Country Fire Authority (CFA) as a vital weapon in its bushfire fight each year, having been used to spot "many" fires over the years.

But the management and ownership of the fire tower is at the centre of a dispute between Moyne Shire Council, the state environment department and the CFA over who is responsible for the increasingly dilapidated building.

Council says 'it's not ours'

Moyne Shire Council recently received a request from the Hopkins Curdies CFA group to investigate replacing the fire tower as it had been deemed unsafe for use.

According to a report to the council, the CFA indicated the council owned the tower and was responsible for its repair or replacement.

However, the council's investigations found it did not own the asset, and that it was built on crown land, meaning it was the responsibility of the state government.

Councillors this week voted to withdraw the council from any responsibilities connected to the tower, including the provision of employees to man the tower on high risk days, minor cleaning and readiness of the fire tower, and the installation of a portable toilet.



The Mt Warrnambool Fire Tower has fallen into disrepair.*(ABC South West Victoria: Matt Neal)*

Instead, councillors suggested the council continue to pay the CFA the amount it contributes for staff - between \$4000 and \$9000 - but leave the administration and provision of personnel to the CFA.

So who owns the tower?

A Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning spokesperson confirmed the property was on crown land.

"In the 1970s, the fire tower was built as a joint project between [Moyne Shire's predecessor] Warrnambool Shire Council and CFA," the spokesperson said.



Mt Warrnambool rises 216 metres above sea level in south-west Victoria.*(ABC South West Victoria: Matt Neal)*

"Maintenance and management of the tower has continued to be a joint arrangement between local government and CFA.

"No formal tenure arrangements are in place."

The spokesperson said the tower was in CFA jurisdiction despite it being on Crown land and the department having a firefighting role via its Forest Fire Management Victoria arm.

What does the CFA say?

A CFA spokesperson said the Mount Warrnambool fire tower would be fully operational throughout this year's fire season and the authority would continue to fulfil a leadership role in managing and maintaining it.



Sections of the tower have fallen apart over the years.(ABC South West Victoria: Matt Neal)

However the CFA stopped short of committing to full ownership of the tower.

"Fire towers are valuable community assets and we'll work with stakeholders to determine funding arrangements for ongoing maintenance," the spokesperson said.

"CFA will endeavour to deliver any necessary maintenance works to ensure the lookout remains operational, in line with CFA South West Region's infrastructure priorities."

The ABC understands that discussions are continuing between the three parties.