

Assistant Clerk Committees  
Department of the Legislative Council  
Fire Service Bill Select Committee  
Parliament House, Spring Street  
East Melbourne VIC 3002

Dear Sir/ Madam

My name is Paul Horton. I am currently and Operations Officer with Country Fire Authority working from CFA HQ, East Burwood.

I write to you to express my absolute support for the proposed reforms.

Since starting my Professional Career in September 1987, I have served on Fire Stations, at Fiskville (as an Instructor), HQ Operations and District HQ Level.

For the last 9.5 years my task has been directly supporting Volunteers, Communities, and Municipalities in Benalla, Mansfield and Mt.Buller.

My entire career has been in support of Volunteers, most certainly the last period of time encouraging, leading, mentoring yet learning from these fine people.

Since 1987 I am proud and honoured to have received my National Medal for Service, 30 year Service Medal, Major Fires (2009) Medal and a Commendation for Service Medal.

I have also received written commendations for my work in a team tasked with the Rescue of two 3yo twin children in 1988.

My service on Stations included the Urbanised areas of Boronia, Doveton and the Latrobe Valley with small secondments to Springvale and Ballarat.

Although I was a Volunteer prior to my Career, I have also taken opportunities to Volunteer in support of disadvantaged children and Families through Big Brothers Big Sisters and the YMCA.

My family enjoys living in Victoria with all it has to offer. Equally they also understand the challenges of our environment. When living in Gippsland we were threatened by significant fires. My wife is skilled enough that our family can be packed and ready to leave in 25 minutes.

I believe I am well placed to write this submission.

Fire Brigades, like any team require the right skill mix on the task at the right time.

My service in the first 3 years in the Latrobe Valley saw (as Officers) us working on our own.

Known as an A1 Station, Traralgon in early 2000's had a Human risk of 25000 people, significant Building risk, the Princes Highway, large tracks of open grassland to the North of town, the foothills of the Great Divide, Australian Paper Mills (APM) and of course Loy Yang Power Station.

We supported Volunteer Brigades from Glengarry to Callignee whilst maintaining a watch room that would receive 000 Emergency Calls from the Public.

The power Station did have some internally trained staff but at approximately 13 Klm distant and "one up," responding to Loy Yang was always a daunting proposition. To overcome issues of Skill mix, numbers in force to manage risk and develop a relief capacity, there were many occasions where I would respond up to 6 volunteer Brigades during the day or a weekend (particularly Holiday periods) to hope that I would have enough people to manage the response. I could only manage the risk with the skill mix that was available on arrival.

This strategy was common amongst all the officers because our Volunteers have families, work lives (many self-employed) and their commitment to Community can and should never be questioned. There are simply times (and there are many growing Community issues) that impact on peoples time and availability. That remains true in 2017.

In approx. 2004, CFA developed a capability for Fire fighters (career) to be stationed at Traralgon and Morwell. This was part of a wider strategy to support and in effect remove A1 Stations. This had the benefits of growing our teams, exponentially growing training opportunities for Volunteers and CFA overall capability to the Community.

CFA for ever and a day was and should remain a Volunteer based organisation. The support of Career Staff is vital for the background mechanics of an organisation. This is reflected in Surf Life Saving, SES, YMCA and many other organisations that require many people.

That said, whether we are Paid or unpaid, one thing is common to us all.

We only have 168 hours in a week.

As in any team, time must be spent on skill acquisition, maintenance, mentoring, advocacy, Municipal liaison, Agency relationships, working parties, projects, response, recovery, planning for Emergencies, appliance checks and a working knowledge of all systems.

It's a discussion I've personally had with many volunteers, when accounting for Family time, work time, health (eating and sleeping) our Volunteers are really hard pressed.

The reaction so far has been to complain there is too much being expected. They want less training, less commitment and much less accountability.

The benefit(s) of the reforms are many.

Allowing people to do the tasks required in the 168 hrs in a week supports a Community. Community engagement is key and can only be done when the Community as a whole is available. Agencies must be connected and available when the Community is.

First and foremost that must be the measure, Community engagement and resilience.

That Community must also include our Tourists and Visitors to Victoria. They all deserve (and I believe expect) the support they will seek when they want it.

It matters not if that Community is Warrandyte, Lara, Collins Street Offices or Manangatang.

The Community that lives, works, loves, grows their families and sets long term goals needs to be supported in their time of need. As our State grows so should the support behind it.

These reforms have never been about minimising a group or “squeezing them out.”

Those who oppose reform actually oppose change.

Change is inevitable; it must be embraced and encouraged. Who the Staff work for is far less relevant than the job they do. The relationships currently at work between Staff and Volunteers will remain. The only change that occurs is those same staff having a say in their own futures without undue external influence. Professional Staff are not there as servants to Volunteers. They are serving Communities and supporting the layers that connect to make Communities safer. This allows them as people to be enhanced and supported, not undermined and attacked.

I've had Volunteer who is a professional cleaner (self-employed) approach me in Public lamenting the view that he and I are being treated poorly in our work place. When I said I'm not a cleaner he restated that he meant his life as a Firefighter. My 30 years and almost 900 assessments mean he and I are not the same in any comparison.

The attitude to change is crucial. Those opposed still seek a system where near enough is good enough.

They seek isolation against connectedness. They seek a singular system where by a local farmer that spends 10 hours a week “in Fire Service mode” can dictate the design, planning and expenditure of a half a billion dollar organisation. CFA Board, Chief, CEO have those responsibilities and accountabilities, this is appropriate.

Those who oppose reform actually have no Authority. They are a branch of CFA where membership is by Brigade, not individual. It is right that Volunteers be able to have a say in their safety, wellbeing and worth. That is an individual choice that should be embraced by all.

The real story there is that as Volunteers, with only 168 hours in any week, are struggling to maintain their innate sense of Community support. That is not a fault, but a reality.

The Fire Service, as with Police or Ambulance or the Health sector must grow and support Communities as they grow.

Our aging population is reflective in the Membership of CFA. Those who seek to oppose change are neglecting the responsibility we all have. That is to prepare the Organisation, our Communities and ourselves for the next challenge and generation. That alone is an attitude that these reforms will support. Maintaining the status quo will not.

As has been reflected in the 2016 Census, Communities and the State of Victoria are and have been growing for some time.

The mechanism of support must also grow. Public (Community) trust should never be sacrificed or even threatened because the Fire Brigade wasn't up to it.

The disputation process for the last 4 or so years must end. On a personal level, Volunteers such as my 2 Children are constantly asked by friends "will the Brigade come if I call? Through to "why would you want to spend time working for that mob?"

The public needs to believe its Fire Brigade is up to the task.

We need to stop loading up Volunteers with unrealistic expectations and accountabilities.

We must ensure they remain valued and encouraged. We must not however take for granted their capability in an environment that is growing in size and complexity. We must also have a Fire Service that will be capable of seeing trends in Community and Risk into the future.

The modern Fire Service can still be Community based and focussed, but should never rely on its work force that at any given moment may not be available.

I thank you for your time and the opportunity.

I am not seeking confidentiality in this submission.

Warm regards

Paul Horton

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]