

Matthew Muscat



RE: FIRE SERVICE REFORM AND PRESUMPTIVE LEGISLATION BILL SUBMISSION

To all select committee members

My name is Matthew Muscat and I am a Senior Station Officer with CFA stationed at Morwell Fire Station and I am writing to you fully supporting the fire service reform and presumptive legislation bill 2017.

I have been a part of CFA for twenty years, 9 years as a volunteer firefighter at Springvale and Carrum Downs and 12 years as a career firefighter.

I currently work at Morwell which is part of a larger regional area that is the Latrobe Valley. Morwell has several risks including Yallourn power station and open cut mine, Hazelwood power station and open cut mine, Loy Yang power station and open cut mine, Jeeralang gas turbine station, Gippsland water factory, HVP plantations, Maryvale paper mill, Latrobe regional hospital, Maryvale private hospital, Latrobe regional airport, multiple nursing homes and ever increasing population growth.

Morwell provides support to many other CFA brigades including Traralgon, Boolarra, Yinnar, Yinnar Sth, Churchill, Moe, Newborough and Yallourn Nth. To provide this support to neighbouring brigades effectively requires a more advanced and modernised fire service. This reform will allow for a more efficient and timely response together with a safe number of firefighters who have the right training and skills, to provide the best possible service to the community. It should not be lost that the service to the community has to be and must be the priority.

This reform will enhance fire service delivery to the community of Victoria. Only a modernised fire service, with the inclusion of boundary changes, can move and adapt as the Victorian population grows in Melbourne and regional areas. The demands on the fire services are ever growing and with this we need to ensure that our fire services in Victoria meet these demands now and into the future. Unfortunately I have witnessed on numerous occasions where there has been a lack of response from brigades. Brigades' failing to respond to calls occurs more often than you'd like to think and this is something I hear on the radio at work on daily basis and too often trucks are responding with only one firefighter which is not safe for firefighters or the public.

There is no doubt it's getting harder for volunteers to attend fire brigade activities, including fire calls, training and other CFA activities. Family life, working longer hours and the ever demanding pressures of life in general are making it harder for people to volunteer their time. So why are we continuing with an archaic fire service that is placing so many volunteers under pressure to meet the demands of a fire service that they cannot keep up with. This is why this reform is so desperately needed.

The proposed reform will see 3% of the CFA, this being the career staff, employed by FRV and CFA becoming 100% volunteer with support staff as required. I know of numerous volunteers at Integrated Stations that want this sense of identity and autonomy given back to them. The reform will allow for volunteers at integrated stations to once again thrive and prosper and provide them with some ownership. I believe this is something that will see volunteer numbers strengthen into the future and allow volunteers to continue what they do and that's providing an emergency service to the community. This reform does not diminish in any way the ability for volunteers to respond to incidents, they will still, like now, be paged to an incident and if they are available to respond they will. The volunteers who I have spoken to have said categorically that this reform will not cause them to leave CFA and some of them also said that if a volunteer leaves because they are scared of change, well maybe they're not in CFA for the right reasons. CFA will always have a capacity to provide response to large campaign fires.

I think it's disrespectful to say that volunteers will feel less engaged or not provide service delivery to the community because of this reform, and those individuals who spread these lies should show volunteers a little more respect for who they are and why they volunteer for their community.

In regards to short term and long term cost impacts, as someone who doesn't work for the Treasury Department, I can only see that this reform will decrease the duplication of departments within CFA and MFB. In both services we have HR departments, payroll, infrastructure, OH&S and many other departments that are duplicated between the two services. There has to be some cost savings by bringing certain departments together and amalgamating departments. As the fire services are currently, they will be funded by the fire service levy and this will continue. With any reform there will be a cost, however I trust that Governments allow for this funding in their estimates as they do for any change in any area.

With the career staff component of CFA going across to FRV the cost savings for CFA will be great. These funds can then be allocated to providing better services, training and support to volunteers and will reduce the amount of fundraising volunteers have to perform to buy equipment or appliances. This enables volunteers to spend more time with their family rather than having to sell sausages at the local IGA.

My views on the policy rationale is as follows

Victoria is rapidly growing and changing every day and Victoria's fire services need to adapt to this change in order to provide the best possible service to the community. Victoria's fire services have remained largely unchanged for 60 years and as firefighters we are being let down by an archaic out dated structure. As previously stated there has been 8 reviews in 10 years into the fire services in Victoria and key findings from those reviews all point to the fact that major reform and change needs to occur to ensure that as our State evolves, so too must our fire services . As I understand it the fire service boundary issue has been one that has gone on since the 1970's and now is the time to move into the 21st century when it comes to the way our fire services in Victoria are structured.

Presumptive legislation, as part of this bill, is so vitally important to all firefighters. With the largest reform of Victoria's fire services in over 60 years this part of the bill will ensure that firefighters who contract one of the twelve identified cancers due to the work they perform will be fully compensated. On a personal note I would like to acknowledge and thank Colleen Hartland for the work she has done over the years trying to have presumptive legislation brought before the Parliament. I was in attendance at Parliament when Colleen put forward a private members' bill 3 years ago or so. Can I say that the lack of support from the then Liberal State Government, voting it down on 3 occasions and making a statement that they struggle to see the link between firefighting and cancer, was the most disgusting and dishonest performance I've seen from a Government.

Over the past 4 years or so the fire services in Victoria have been in the spotlight, whether it's more than 20 front pages of the Herald Sun, on bumper stickers, 8 inquiries in 10 years, the closure of Fiskville, the demonising of firefighters in the public arena, creating new Fair Work legislation that allows volunteers to have a say in my conditions of employment and the many other arguments backwards and forwards between employers, employees, volunteers and representatives bodies. All firefighters volunteer and career staff, including the public are sick and tired of firefighters and their families being used as political footballs. The stories of children in the school playground telling kids of career firefighters, we don't want to play with you your Dad's a UFU thug or someone who's wearing a T shirt that identifies them as a career firefighter being denied service in a pub and the constant bickering on social media is abhorrent and has to stop.

The impact of the industrial disputation my colleagues and I has created a toxic environment on the Fire station. This disputation has had emotional, physical and psychological impacts on numerous firefighters and has created a lack of public confidence in Victoria's fire services.

In conclusion it's vitally important that this reform is passed in Parliament for the benefit of all fire fighters in Victoria and to ensure the fire service move forward into the future. The reform will allow for a modernised fire service into the future while providing a safer working environment for all firefighters. The community of Victoria deserve better than what we are currently providing and it's expected that when you pay for a service it's the best possible service you can get.

By bringing the fire services in to the 21st century and investing in their future gives the public confidence and assurance that when they are in a time of need, we'll be there to help as quickly and efficiently as possible.

I ask that when the committee consider submissions that you do so based on factual evidence provided. This reform has a lot of emotion around it and unfortunately the emotion needs to be discounted from the debate. This is not about emotion nor is it about individuals pushing their hidden agenda, it needs to be about what's best for the community, how we can move forward and modernise the fire services in Victoria, how to streamline the way fire services are structured and most importantly how we best provide for and protect all firefighters in Victoria.

I thank you for providing me with this opportunity to express my point of view on this extremely important reform and here's hoping for more positive outlook for Victoria's fire services into the future.

Yours Sincerely

Matthew Muscat