

This submission to the Upper House Select Committee for the Fire Services Bill is made on behalf of the Benalla and District Fire Brigade Group. The Group represents nineteen fire brigades in North East Victoria within the municipality of Benalla in District 23.

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4<sup>th</sup> July, 2017

Dear Committee Members,

Brigades in the municipality of Benalla have a long and proud tradition of supporting our local communities through fire events and other natural disasters. Historically strike team support has been provided willingly from this region to areas all over Victoria and when necessary interstate deployments. Never before have we witnessed in Volunteers so much disillusionment with the CFA management, board and office of the Chief in trying to market change on the organisation with no factual details of how it is actually going to work. Benalla has just experienced the driest June on record and Volunteers should be focussing their energy on the forthcoming fire season instead of worrying about significant change to the fire services which is occurring without a proper consultation and planning process.

What has been noted by all Volunteers is the complete abandonment by the Victoria Government and CFA Management of the Volunteer Charter hanging in most fire stations in Victoria. The action of the Victorian Government and CFA Management of not abiding by the Charter and not engaging in effective consultation means that Volunteers will lack trust and question the integrity of future policy changes made as a result of the current legislation before parliament.

Our major concerns include the following:

#### **Impact on Fire Service Delivery Across Victoria**

The new model for CFA created in the proposed legislation is to use a process of secondment of middle management from FRV to CFA. We perceive this model will impact on CFA's ability to protect life and property and have noted some specific concerns below:

- Staff from FRV will be mainly trained in an urbanized environment and may not have the empathy or skills required for management of Volunteers.
- CFA need to develop its own Volunteer friendly culture with the ability for the organisation to recruit and train its own staff with strong people management skills and an understanding of the community served.
- CFA would benefit from being able to recruit staff directly including lateral entry with skills appropriate to their needs. For instance wildfire instructors from DELWP.
- Currently CFA is unable to fill operational officer positions and this model will further limit the organisation to recruit suitable staff from those available.
- Will the Chief Officer be able to have control over staff from FRV including recruitment, discipline and relocation?
- How will the memorandum of understanding between CFA and FRV in relation to the secondment model deal with enterprise agreements between FRV and its staff?
- What will be the impact of a future EBA negotiated between FRV and its staff on CFA Volunteers equipment and training?

#### **Effect on Volunteer Engagement and Participation in Fire Service Delivery**

The proposed legislation, lack of consultation and insufficient detail in conjunction with the CFA "Hard Sell" to Volunteers have all contributed to lack of confidence and trust in the Victorian Government and the CFA leadership which will further impact on Volunteer response to incidents; particularly large incidents requiring ongoing support from CFA strike teams. There is a belief

amongst Volunteers that they are being blackmailed in that they will not give up protecting their communities and can be forced to adopt change without proper due process or consultation. It appears that Volunteers will have less ability in the new structure to influence their own destiny.

Operational relationships between FRV staff and Volunteers are unclear with many uncertainty's such as will FRV staff take instructions from Volunteers Sector Commanders at fires when they are not the Incident Controller.

### **Short and Long Term Cost Impact on Fire Service Provision**

In the Legislative model most integrated brigades will see Volunteers separate from paid staff with new fire station facilities and equipment being provided duplicating resources in many areas.

- When CFA is currently underfunded and the average replacement age of tankers getting older instead of younger is this an efficient use of public funds and will it increase the risks to communities?
- How will a future funding model without dramatically increasing the fire services levy guarantee CFA with adequate financial resources?
- What will be the financial impact on the State if a significant drop in services provided by Volunteers is encountered as a result of these changes?

### **Underlying Policy Rationale**

None of the nine enquiries into fire service reform cited by the Minister, CFA Board and CEO recommended the abandonment of the current CFA integrated fire service model. It appears that the fire services reform is more to do with the implementation of a new EBA than modernisation of the fire service. How do you ensure that a future FRV EBA does not impact on CFA Volunteers in future Memorandums of Understanding between FRV and CFA?

### **Presumptive Legislation**

The Benalla and District Fire Brigade Group holds the strong view that Fire Services Reform and the Presumptive Rights Compensation Bills should be dealt with as separate Bills of parliament. In addition all fire fighters need to be treated equally. Is it equitable that Volunteers in comparison to paid fire fighters have to face an advisory committee and prove their case in order to have their claim allowed?

Members of the Select Committee we appreciate you being involved in the review of the issues surrounding the fire services reform legislation. The Country Fire Authority is an organisation with its roots going back a hundred years from our predecessors that has provided protection and assistance for many and been a key element of community life. In the past Volunteers and staff have had unfettered loyalty for this organisation and the people they serve. Please consider your future actions carefully so we can allow communities to continue to benefit from CFA like they have in the past. We don't want to lose a culture in an organisation that is very special and quite unique.

Thank you for considering our submission. We consent for this submission to be listed on the Committee's website.

On behalf of Benalla and District Fire Brigade Group

[Redacted signature]

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