

The Chairperson

Legislative Council Select Committee (Fire Services)

As a volunteer member of Tawonga Rural Fire Brigade may I raise my concerns about the proposed legislation affecting the makeup of fire services in rural, regional and outer suburban areas of Victoria. I have been a member of the CFA since the major fires of 2003. This membership began with a so-called integrated station in outer Melbourne where, even then, there was a division between career and volunteer members. Although this was only mild, the volunteers were treated as secondary members of the brigade. This difference was not evident when I transferred my membership to Tawonga. However, since the Government's proposed changes to the structure of the CFA, I have again noticed a degree of antagonism between the career staff in our area and the volunteers. One hopes this is not transferred to the fire-ground when the next serious fire occurs.

The north-east of Victoria is one of the most fire prone areas of Victoria, if not the world. A week ago I was in France and even there, the pompiers were aware of our fire situation. People were interested to hear of the Government's changes to our fire service.

The issues I would like the Select Committee to consider are:

- If the current integrated brigades become career only, what will be the reduction in volunteer numbers and how will this affect provision of manpower for major campaigns. The fire fighters attending large fires I have been involved with have been almost exclusively volunteers, very very few career staff on the actual fire ground.
- Removal of the paid support staff who are available for volunteers.
- Absolute lack of detail in the Government's legislation.
- Failure of the Government to adequately consult with our representative organisation (VFBG) despite our Charter.
- A reduction in comraderie between paid staff and volunteers. This has been demonstrated by our brigades being the subject of graffiti of, and theft of protest signs.

The structure of the CFA as it existed was wonderful. It was created decades ago following serious fires and the ability of segregated brigades to deal effectively with these serious campaigns. Global warming will certainly not reduce the fires of the future and the proposed legislation, what we know of it, will only degrade the effectiveness of the fire services to protect both property and life. Any reduction in our ability to fight fires must be resisted. If the new service resulted in any increased loss of life, it would be a heavy burden for the Select Committee, the Government, the CFA Board and CEO, and the fire fighter on the ground.

I urge the Select Committee to ensure that adequate consultation occurs with the volunteers.

Thank you for accepting this submission.

Ian Smith

Tawonga Rural Fire Brigade

