

INQUIRY INTO THE FIREFIGHTERS' PRESUMPTIVE RIGHTS COMPENSATION AND FIRE SERVICES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (REFORM) BILL 2017

Submission by - Operations Officer, [REDACTED]

CFA District 24 (Wodonga)

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I SUPPORT FIRE SERVICES REFORM.

I am the Officer in Charge of the Wodonga Fire Brigade. I have over 11 years' experience in this role as follows:

1. OIC Wangaratta (9 Years)
2. OIC Wodonga (2 Years).
3. I have been an Operations Officer with CFA for 13 years, had 10 years career (on-Station) experience prior at both Geelong City & Dandenong Brigades
4. I was also a volunteer with Castlemaine Brigade for 5 years before entering Career ranks.

The risk in my area dictates a much more thorough approach to a professional service than is currently provided. Some of these risks are as follows:

- Major transport & rail hub on the Melbourne to Sydney Rail line
- Wodonga has one of the largest Regional Growth rates in Victoria, greater than Bendigo, Ballarat & Geelong.
- History of large scale Wild Fire
- Hume Freeway Major Transport route between Melbourne & Sydney
- Close proximity to 3 Alpine Resorts
- Areas of high transient population (Tourism)
- Australian Defence force barracks (Multiple)
- Rapidly growing & diverse structural risks (between Wodonga, Albury & surrounds)
- Declining CFA Volunteer involvement due to economic & social restrictions
- Significant major fire history with 3 local & major fire campaigns that have each destroyed over one million hectares of country, taken human lives, destroyed private homes, assets & stock.

Reasons Why the Proposed Reforms Should Go Ahead:

The Proposed Reforms:

- Do not replace volunteer representation on the CFA Board
- Do not replace volunteers on the District Planning Committees
- Do not replace volunteer CFA Groups
- Do not replace volunteer CFA Brigades
- Do not replace volunteers on Emergency Management Committees
- Do not replace volunteers on Fire Management Committees
- Do not replace volunteer trainers and assessors who deliver training courses and skills maintenance to Brigades, Groups and others
- Do not replace volunteers in IMT's (Incident Management Teams) as these teams are agency blind and many volunteers hold the qualifications and skills
- Will provide an opportunity to set up FRV in a more strategic manner so as to be better positioned to meet growth & risk challenges. Better service delivery!
- CFA, as it currently stands, does not seem able to address the needs of a rapidly changing & complex service.
- Creation of opportunity to address rebuilding organisational foundations
- Should address span of control issues reducing staff burnout, anxiety, depression & stress.

Impact on Fire Service Delivery:

There are currently some 35,000 operational volunteers within CFA and the proposed reforms will have no effect on that membership for the following reasons.

The proposed reforms:

- Do not call for volunteer resignations from their CFA Brigades and no Brigades are being forcibly closed or reduced in any capacity
- Do not call for Groups within CFA to be reduced in any capacity
- Do not call for the CFA Act to change but, however, provide strength for volunteers
- Will continue to strengthen CFA Brigades and Groups ability to maintain their autonomy to recruit, prepare and respond with volunteers providing fire service to their local communities and throughout Victoria and interstate as necessary
- Will impact Wodonga Fire Brigade however this has been seen as an opportunity to strengthen the service delivery to the immediate area of Wodonga with an opportunity of additional resources
- Should provide for long term community benefits due to more effective planning of both services.

Fire Services reform, as proposed, will facilitate opportunities to improve both services. The following examples show why:

- **Strategic Human Resource Planning.**

This key element has evaded CFA for the whole period of my employment. We have never been involved in, nor seen any organisational evidence to provide for a comprehensive, state-wide Human Resourcing Strategy. This level of planning is expected at Brigade level, however, fails at District level & above – dismally.

In this day & age, I would expect significant analysis & resources would go into establishing - *what is the correct workforce structure required to meet the needs of the customer*

(community). Failure to do this will result in many issues that we are already facing; stress, depression & anxiety not to mention difficulty in effective service delivery.

Our CFA needs to commit to effective HR planning. This point significantly hampers our ability to perform in a range of key aspects.

- **Strategic Infrastructure Management.**

Once again, this critical item is in major need of overhaul. Our processes for management & review of new buildings, infrastructure maintenance, and the provision of new vehicles/equipment is, in majority, ad hoc. CFA lacks a consistent structure from Brigade level, through to Districts & Regions. I recently investigated the option for an Aerial Pumper at Wodonga & was shocked to hear that we didn't have a structure at State level to manage this important component.

- **Cease Industrial Disputations.**

Given long term industrial disputation, which is made worse by volunteer members of CFA / VFBV wanting to influence the conditions proposed in our EBA, a growing divide between Career & Volunteer members within CFA is obvious. I dread to consider that this may erode public confidence in our ability to perform our functions. Separation of the Volunteer & Career components of CFA to address EBA requirements is now at a critical stage.

- **Organisation Funding Model Improvement.**

CFA has struggled for many years now with the delivery of services due to an inadequate funding model. A prime example of this is the additional financial pressure that is created from the VESEP grants system. Whilst some great achievements have been gained through the generosity of the VESEP system, it places significant pressure on CFA as it does not include recurrent funding for maintenance & replacement etc. This process is now seen by many as being more focussed on political point scoring – than risk mitigation.

Poorly scoped major projects continue to plague the organisation such as the TRPP (Technical Rescue POD project) which has floundered in its objective of addressing one of our key emergency management responsibilities being: Trench, high angle & confined space rescue.

Another example is our investment in the Municipal fire planning process (Integrated Fire Management Planning) that has failed to improve the fire management planning process at the coal face. I understand the importance of being efficient & 'Doing more with less' however, the complaints that I hear from Finance & Administration Managers, centre around the need for Regional Budget increases instead of many years without even CPI based corrections.

- **Lack of Organisational Dedication to Career/Volunteer Integration.**

I have witnessed, first hand, the systemic failure of Integration. In order for integration to work, the Organisation must have very similar standards for both Volunteer & Staff members. New Station design, training levels, vehicle & equipment procurement & design

standards are a few examples of where CFA does not have equality. Our Volunteers have regularly mentioned to me that because of these different standards, Volunteer members are sometimes left feeling like second rate citizens of CFA. I have led the building of one integrated fire Station being Wangaratta. Given differing standards for Career & Volunteer members, the transition into new Stations has been made unnecessarily difficult in trying to manage the range of double standards.

- **Volunteer Brigade Viability.**

I am a staunch supporter of the Volunteer fire fighting system; however, things are not as rosie as they once were. Volunteer memberships are declining, the rural demographic is changing & the notion of double income families have taken their toll. In some areas, Volunteer response is in need of bolstering & in some areas it is failing. Growing urban communities need a fire based emergency service that is timely, professional, equipped, respected & equal to the service provided in the metropolitan area. I strongly believe that this service (FRV) needs a comprehensive management structure with a much stronger focus on developing urban environments.

In Summary

I support the proposed changes to the Victorian firefighting system. I, and a number of my peers, are excited about the proposed changes & hope that the opportunities that have been raised above are essential to the formation of a new service (FRV) & importantly, to the improvement of CFA.

I cannot foresee any major negatives to CFA & volunteerism under this proposal.

It is vitally important that both services take opportunities to address long term issues that prevent us from lifting our performance in the delivery of services to our communities.

I, for one, am willing to support positive change & assist to drive the formation of a new service.

Regards,

[Redacted signature block]

- An organisation that does not seem to have the best interests of its members at heart, such as the Fiskville debacle delineates that change is inevitable & needs to be carefully managed.