

I wish to make a submission to the Committee, as follows:

Background:

I have lived in the Shire of Nillumbik for 33 years – since just after the Ash Wednesday fires in 1983 – 2.5 bushy acres in North Warrandyte, 1983 – 1989, 20 acres pasture near Panton Hill, 1989-1998, and on acreage in Kangaroo Ground, present time. Neither myself nor my husband are in the CFA.

All of our properties have involved personal responsibility for reducing fire hazard, and all of these properties are under CFA Fire Management. Whilst resident in all of these properties, at various regular times we have been visited by CFA volunteers who have assessed the property for fire prevention works, and have been helpful and advised us re local bushfire behaviour, and property and life preservation in a bushfire. We also made ourselves aware of the findings and recommendations of the Ash Wednesday Royal Commission, and later the Black Saturday Royal Commission.

All the current Government committees, policies, and city living people assume a bushfire will start or occur in convenient daylight hours between 7am – 8pm – ‘Leave and Live’. However rural people know this is fallacy, and it is important to make property safe in the event that evacuation is not possible, and you are there in the dark with your family surrounded by a fire. Planning is vital, CFA is vital.

On hot summer nights, a car accident can cause a fast moving bushfire, tourists flicking a cigarette butt out the window can cause catastrophe. City dwellers don’t deal with these consequences, yet pontificate about how rural people’s fire services are to be run.

The CFA is a vital community organisation, and rural people work together with the common aim of protecting the community overall. If I don’t do my fire prevention work, I endanger my neighbours, and the wider community. An experience foreign to city dwellers and bureaucrats who never have to face the threat of property loss or death each Summer. Total economic annihilation is not beyond expectation some dry Summer seasons. Living with this threat impacts on families, and hence the reliance on the CFA and its surge capacity.

There are several linked issues which any thorough and caring Committee should consider with regards to CFA autonomy, volunteer numbers, and surge capacity, and which seem to be pushed conveniently aside by UFU/Andrews Govt., but which have massive outcomes for rural residents:

1. The 2009 Royal Commission recommended an increased Government programme of forestry maintenance and back burning for rural community safety and to ensure the on-going economic viability of rural areas which otherwise could be wiped out by bushfire (as per Marysville). However successive State Governments (mainly Labour) have ignored this advice and recommendation and come up with various excuses – not appropriate weather conditions (seriously weird as rural land owners managed to back burn throughout the year, even in wet seasons), no funds available (well thanks! so much for regard for rural living people), or personnel shortage (DEWLP excuse because they spent their budget elsewhere instead of protecting forested areas from wildfire). So an even bigger burden falls on CFA and rural people due to the FLAGRANT NEGLIGENCE of State Government and authorities in ignoring a Royal Commission finding. At the very least, current levels of forest maintenance and vegetation build up should be examined in the light of any change to CFA autonomy affecting volunteer numbers – an FIRE IMPACT STUDY with CURRENT conditions

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if volunteers walk away from the CFA due to Govt. ramrod change. Just what IS proposed to deal with those situations? 'Let it rip' is not sufficient planning. Where is the definitive, comprehensive report, well researched by independent fire researchers as to how Victoria would fare with 50 per cent less volunteers, or 80 per cent less volunteers and no CFA autonomy on fire fighting decisions with current vegetation levels.

Where is the same information with regards to the predicted increase in fire days because of Climate Change, with its acknowledged increase of severity of bushfires? It is an appalling lack of regard of semi and rural people's lives to not link the importance of the autonomous CFA surge capacity with the CURRENT record amount of forest vegetation which by the way, is much greater than it was before the 2009 fires. So Govt. bimbos just nod and pass legislation with no research or comprehensive plan? Proven negligence.

2. I also doubt if the State Government or any authority looking at the CFA Volunteer numbers and surge capacity has even conducted any RURAL ECONOMIC IMPACT STUDY if there is a reduced number of volunteers to fight a large rural fire on a catastrophic day. This is a criminal neglect of Govt. duty, as this should be studied and reported in depth before any decision regarding any re-organisation of fire services, or affecting the CFA. Close enough is not good enough – some wave of the hand estimation of some bureaucrat or academic is not sufficient. And I challenge you to publish any report for community consultation and comment.

A bushfire wipes out GENERATIONS of selective breeding of stock. You can't regain decades of breeding by going to the local stock sales, nor replace imported animal genes which may be no longer available.

A bushfire wipes out crops – a year's worth of work and investment gone. Economic impact huge.

A bushfire wipes out family homes and farm infrastructure – almost impossible to rebuild as the economic value is not always insurable or financially able to be insured.

A bushfire wipes out local small businesses – town businesses with overdrafts which through lack of local trade because people leave the district or cannot afford purchases, themselves have to fold.

A bushfire impacts on local school numbers when residents leave permanently.

A bushfire impacts on the mental health of survivors left with asset destruction.

So many aspects which the Andrew's Government, and UFU just sweep under the carpet in the pretence that the whole of Victoria will be made safer with the UFU being in control of fire.

What blatant neglect and disgusting abuse of rural people, and the asset of Victoria.

3. Another aspect ignored by city living bureaucrats nor even given any airspace, but which contributes to make the fire threat real for rural residents:

Planning laws state that if a house is 50 per cent burned, it is regarded as uninhabitable.

So Planning laws mean a rural owner needs to apply for a new Planning Permit to rebuild.

This is not necessarily forthcoming – Wye River, Kinglake, St Andrews, and Marysville residents can attest to this. So although a resident has occupied a location for decades, if a fire destroys their property they lose the ability to rebuild, and generally have an unsaleable block. Does the Government/UFU care that a reduced CFA volunteer numbers and capacity may have contributed to my house burning?

Will the Government buy back my piece of unsaleable semi rural property which has been deemed not to be able to be granted another Planning Permit to build??? I guess I will just go on Centrelink for the rest of my life as my ONLY asset would be no more. More Economic Impact to study for the overall Impact Cost figures? Perhaps the Committee could bother to consult personally with Wye River and Marysville residents on this aspect of community cost, so they get the full and unabridged version of impact.

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4. Couple the above with the fact that rural people have a much narrower choice of insurer – once you are on a property more than 5 acres, you are deemed to be a ‘farm’. This affects many semi-rural areas. And you have to take out farm insurance, which most domestic insurers do not offer. Most Farm Insurance will only offer ‘replacement’ or ‘like with like’. NOT a cash payout.

The result of the insurance is that if a house cannot be rebuilt because of a Planning Permit issue because of fire, there is NO insurance payout. I don’t think city dwellers or UFU members have this issue to contend with for their homes or properties. If a house burns down in the city, a Planning Permit is not withheld due to such planning laws. But it is obviously ok to reduce CFA operations, and shaft rural people who have lived safely in a location for decades, and even survived previous bushfires, for the sake of UFU agendas.

So where is the ECONOMIC IMPACT STUDY on this aspect of the potential lack of CFA surge capacity if volunteers walk away? And better still, where is the study showing how the 450 Fire and Rescue personnel propose to handle fire in Victoria without CFA volunteers and without the surge capacity? Where is any published transparency with regards to the FULL operation methods of any proposed new fire service – BEFORE IT IS ADOPTED. Otherwise Parliamentarians voting for such changes are grossly negligent as the full facts on the effect on rural residents have not been disclosed or examined. And you expect to be re-elected?

Then link the above to the current appalling lack of Govt. forestry maintenance which will increase the intensity of a fast moving fire??? And the touchy feely idea of the Andrew’s Govt to create a new Yarra National Park and slowly acquire back Govt. leased grazing land and re vegetate. Great idea, which office bimbo didn’t think of how to protect the area if the rural population was reduced and the local CFA volunteers walked? ‘Let it rip’ attitude again probably. Stuff any rural businesses and people anywhere nearby. And stuff any Leadbeater’s Possums, etc which may have lived in the old forest. Extinction is forever – tough luck guys!

Where are the intellects of the people who should know better than to have anything to do with the potential watering down of the CFA autonomy or to threaten its surge capacity? Will I hold these people responsible? YES – TOTALLY.

They are ignoring 2009 Royal Commission recommendations with regards to forestry maintenance and the importance of surge capacity and CFA, and sacrificing the economic surety and safety of rural communities. That makes them NEGLIGENT, regardless of their political leanings. If there can be a class action over the 2009 fires, the current evidence is there that a Govt has ignored a Royal commission recommendations, purposefully watered down the strength of the CFA, and ignored the sanctity of human life in rural areas. Human rights lawyers will have a feast, and the records are all there as to the lack of Impact Studies, lack of forest maintenance, and lack of care for human life.

A small example: on a mild, 28 degree January day, little breeze, in Kangaroo Ground: (a stone’s throw from North Warrandyte – do you want to briefly pause and contemplate the carnage if a fire gets there?)

- a 10 ha. fire 1km from us a couple of summers ago – heading straight towards us, police warning us personally we might have to evacuate as it was then 650m from us. Helicopters, 2 water bombing aircraft, 25 CFA trucks. About 4 hours to quell the flames. And a WEEK of nightly patrols, bull dozers there daily ensuring burning logs were no threat. Surveillance helicopters with heat sensing equipment at night directing bull dozers and CFA trucks – for the WEEK.

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So how do you expect to protect Victoria if it took that amount of mainly VOLUNTEER personnel and equipment for a 10 ha. fire in a dry summer in Kangaroo Ground, and the CFA volunteers walk due to the UFU agenda for their fire service? Tell me the plan.

Surge capacity was vital – and I doubt that inexperienced Eltham based fire fighters would have any clues as to the local area, nor local fire behaviour. The local CFA knew our neighbour has a bush block with 24 TONS per HECTARE of forest slash on his block – would burn like a bomb, and ensured 2 tankers were at the ready should an ember fall in his block. Do you think the MFB from Eltham would have 2 clues about that local info?

The Incident Controller was a volunteer CFA member of many year's local experience, not some bought in city firefighter.

The 24 tons per hectare would be roughly what is on the forest floor in many places in Victoria right now! – just what do the MFB propose to do with it all? or be able to control it when it gets away because of manpower shortage? Wring their hands and say 'it wasn't our fault'? or 'we haven't dealt with this before'?

5. The argument that 'this model works in NSW' is questionable – NSW has a totally different climate – the main rainfall is in Summer, with high humidity – Victorian authorities (and the Union) know that low humidity increases fire danger. (Anybody gone to Sydney in Summer and remember the humidity??)

Sydney and environs get twice Melbourne's annual rainfall, and mainly over the Summer months, with drier winters. So where is the Summer fire danger in much of NSW? Their dry time is September, when it is rare to get a 40 degree day with a howling northerly, or have such weather for several days at a time, as in a dry Victorian Summer.

Due of the higher rainfall, much of the vegetation has evolved not to have such high volatile oil content, and many understorey species have larger green leaves with greater water content, and do not explode into flame. The Summer soil moisture is higher, so the overall moisture content of vegetation is also correspondingly higher than any area found in Victoria in Summer. So the extent of bushfire is not as potentially catastrophic as in Victoria, which has the distinction of being the worst location in the world for bushfire. So why would you accept unquestioningly that what fire fighting regimes and manpower numbers work in NSW will work in Vic., and with no independent studies, unless you are aligned with unions for your political funding to continue, and also don't care what happens to rural Victorians.

Changing the 'model' argument does not hold, as NSW fire conditions are different, so the 'model' doesn't fit Victoria. I think only the gullible would accept that the conditions in NSW are the same as in Vic., and so the will fit the 'model'.

And just where are the studies of climate, topography, and vegetation to support the 'model fit' argument? Is it just more misinformation foisted on the unsuspecting – if not, prove it and publish the reports and studies – done by exhaustive independent fire researchers before adopting the 'model'. Otherwise I think you are negligent as Parliamentarians as you have abrogated and not completed your Duty of Care to Victorian rural residents.

I think it is madness and negligent to disband or in any way threaten the capacity and autonomy of the CFA, and to instigate chain of command changes. And I think you will all be held responsible if you do – every last one of you.

Because it is all just unproven, unstudied theory – that jeopardises semi rural and rural communities and economies. And it is too late when the next catastrophic fire sweeps Victoria and your volunteer

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base is not there to fight fires with their autonomy, expertise and local knowledge in rural and semi rural areas.

To me, every politician, academic, union personnel and government employee recommending the adoption of un-researched, un-studied, non transparent UFU changes will have blood on their hands, be responsible for the loss of life and economy, and a higher suicide rate of financially wiped out rural residents in the aftermath of the next catastrophic Victorian bush fire.

It is disgraceful that any change to CFA operations is even being contemplated, and all because of a union 'deal' agenda of the Andrews Government - basically so the funding from unions to aligned politicians will continue – a 'sweetheart deal' – with the total betrayal of semi-rural and rural people and ignoring the sanctity of human life.

I think selling rural lives = corrupt Third World type politics.

Because if any politician actually stood by the principles of respect for rural people and the sanctity of human life - they would not even consider anything which hampered the autonomy and proven fine functioning of the CFA. They would take up the 2009 Royal Commission recommendation that the CFA be supported and funding increased, not fly in the face of the Commission.

There are no words sufficiently low to describe humans who do that to other humans, and their record will stand.

Rural people are not the fools that politicians, bureaucrats and unions take them for.

Kangaroo Ground, 2017.