

Select Committee

Fire Service Presumptive Rights Compensation and Fire Services Legislation Reform Bill 2017

Personal Submission

Bill Watson AFSM

Dear Committee Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this submission into the proposed legislation.

This personal submission recommends the Fire Services Presumptive Rights Compensation and Fire Services Legislation Amendment Reform Bill be withdrawn due to it's failure to adequately consult and develop a fire services restructure that will take Victoria's Fire Services effectively into the future.

I am strongly advocating for improvements to our fire services in a fully consultative manner.

I raise these concerns as an experienced volunteer firefighter of 47 years with CFA.

Consultation

- The reform bill has been placed before Parliament without any consultation from volunteer firefighters. Victoria is one of the most fire prone areas in the world. Adequate consultation with personnel such as volunteers is necessary. It affects them, their work environment and the communities in which they serve and live.

Wildfire risks change considerably from Melbourne into outer metropolitan Melbourne with large tracts of urban rural interface, mixed with other risks in industrial, commercial and residential. I do not believe that, changes to the proposed legislation should be without consultation. There are too many unknowns. Implanting another fire service with its own hierarchy of command and control into the current mix of fire services is not the safest most workable option for Victoria.

Consultation cont'd

Moving forward we haven't been standing still since 1950. The journey on change within Country Fire Authority (CFA) with volunteers has been endless. We have constantly developed and improved with operational procedures, equipment design, alerting systems, infrastructure and training standards.

Volunteers have the experience of responding in their local areas they also respond to intrastate, interstate and in some cases overseas. A wealth of knowledge exists. It just needs to be utilised. The reform bill architects have not tapped into this highly skilled valuable resource.

Over the years volunteers have worked with the Forester's, who understand the bush, winds, valleys and local fire behaviour and have worked with highly skilled SSO's (Senior Station Officers) in the urban integrated environment. Together with formalised training it has developed structure firefighting & wildfire skills to a high level. Volunteers have a lot to offer.

We cannot afford to let this knowledge be excluded in the decision making process.

Documented evidence the first time a bushfire was stopped by human intervention was in the Dandenong Ranges in 1968. The CFA East Central Zone Officer, later to become the Chief Officer Ron Orchard stated, that it was the first occasion that a fire of that magnitude and dimension, burning in such appalling conditions was stopped. This was without the aid of cool weather or rain. The controlling officers were Ray Parker from Knox and Ron Blood from Dandenong Ranges. Both were long serving volunteers since the 1940's. Looking into the future we need that continuity of experience that's been handed down. Learning these skills has been crucial in the operational sphere. It does not need to be ignored, watered down or lost.

The Fire Services Review 2015 recommends consultation with volunteer firefighters and their representative bodies to introduce new service delivery models.

Fire Services Review 2015. Recommendation 2a:

The Review recommends that:

The fire services introduce new service delivery models to better meet community needs in a given location, including joint operations in the gMa, day staffing, and hub and spoke integration.

The fire services should consult with both volunteer and paid firefighters and their representative bodies on the most appropriate model to adopt in a given area, with the ultimate decision to be made by the Chief Officers.

gMa. Greater Melbourne Area

CFA Volunteers, Career Staff & Integration

- Fire service coverage for CFA Victoria currently exists through the integration system of career staff and volunteers operating as a team out of 35 CFA stations.

There are 1178 CFA stations as part of a larger force of volunteer brigades located in urban and rural areas.

DEWLP (Department of Environment, Water, Land & Planning) Parks (Parks Victoria), MFB (Metropolitan Fire Brigade) & Industry Brigades all form Victoria's combat Fire Protection.

The bushfire risk is high during summer and requires fast hard hitting strike teams usually made up with volunteer firefighters and at times with career staff in the team mix.

Five (5) tankers crewed with five (5) firefighters for each tanker and one leaders vehicle three (3) firefighters make up a strike team. The integration model is a model that gives us the ability to have home coverage and flexibility to provide equipment and manpower to anywhere in Victoria and Australia.

Years of career staff and volunteers working together to achieve positive outcomes for Victorian communities is a matter of record. We cannot afford to have a system that alienates or weakens the involvement of volunteers. If this legislation is passed, a concern is the strategic thinkers may not fully understand or comprehend the value of this service. This would be a break away from the traditional integration model. The implementation of non-volunteer stations in current CFA areas is far from an ideal model.

CFA have the existing tools and the powers under the chief officer to implement & instigate other integrated stations within the outer metro area.

- We don't need a panel to decide new stations the chief officer can already do this.
- We don't need to split the fire services up to achieve expansion of the integrated model.
- We don't need to add another fire service adding another layer of complication.
- The system of integration works. It takes people to want to make it work. A belief it can be done. It takes leadership to ensure a harmonious relationship exists on all integrated stations.

CFA's current model has the ability to meet population growth and improve service to the Victorian community.

We shouldn't sugar coat that integration is all good and has no faults (refer below comments). These faults can be addressed and must if we are to move forward.

VFBV (Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria) Welfare & Efficiency Survey 2016. 'What do CFA volunteers consider to be the poorest performing areas in CFA' Overall result 'Workforce arrangements which don't allow volunteers and paid staff to work cooperatively as an integrated team', shift by from 4th in 2015 to 3rd in 2016.

CFA Volunteers, Career Staff & Integration Continued

Comments Fire Services Review 2015 Page 28 Relationship between volunteer and paid staff.

However, there were also reports of poor behaviour, with some people making a point of insulting or ignoring the other, which then sometimes resulted in crews refusing to work together or seek assistance from one another when this was required.

The Review also heard of instances where former volunteer firefighters were pressured to cease volunteering once they became paid firefighters. This was seen as an intrusion into what employees did in their private time and ironic that the fire services would be an employer that did not support volunteer firefighting.

Strained relationships between volunteer and paid firefighters do not produce the best outcome for the community and have a demoralising effect on those offended or excluded.

Reports of poor behaviour most definitely need to be addressed. Equally there are reports of integration working well. The system of integration I believe is the way of the future. I cannot see the value of having a career staff only station and nearby a volunteer station in the same town. Nor would I like to see going back to days of old with separate urban & rural brigades in the one station. Advancing the concept of new solely career staff stations in CFA areas is divisive. Yes, Melbourne and regional Victoria is expanding but it doesn't mean we cannot have the very best fire service for the future with volunteers and career staff working side by side closely together in the one service.

Operational Evidence Examples of the Integration model working:

Two (2) practical examples of integration working, one rural and one urban. (attended both).

1) Black Saturday Upper Ferntree Gully bushfire. Knox and Dandenong Ranges Groups of volunteer firefighters with Boronia career & volunteer firefighters. Combined with a mix of incident management team career staff & volunteer firefighters, Parks Victoria officers and air support successfully halted a potentially devastating fire at the foot of the Dandenong Ranges. This successful outcome was achieved even with part of Knox volunteers away on strike team 1352 supporting to Drouin (5 appliances and 1 car), plus Rowville pumper manned with volunteers deployed to Narre Warren. This is one example of the flexibility of integration with volunteers and career firefighters working cohesively. It also is an example of how surge capacity is achieved without depleting local fire coverage. It is critical to have a unified team in these circumstances.

2) Medium Urban Structure Fire (factory) Ferntree Gully. Responding units from Ferntree Gully four (4), Boronia three (3), Bayswater two (2), Rowville one (1). Volunteers and staff from Boronia contained and extinguished going structure fire. Career staff and volunteers working together, 3 volunteer and one integrated brigade attending. Fire coverage for Knox by other brigades maintained. An example of what happens on a regular basis currently throughout the outer metro area. Responding firefighters to this fire approx 30. Note five (5) of the 11 appliances attending are brigade / community funded appliances.

CFA Volunteer Stations Day Time Manning & Response

- One of the most common themes I hear from CFA volunteers is the request for career staff firefighters to be located in volunteer stations during the daytime weekdays when needed to assist with response. Challenges in this area for volunteers to meet service delivery standards exist now and will become more prominent into the future as the population increases. The CFA Annual Report 2015-2016 states response times meeting benchmarks were at 87 per cent. The MFB 2015-2016 annual report states response times was at 85 per cent.

Comments Fire Services Review 2015 Day Staffing page 19.

Day staffing

A common issue raised with the Review was the difficulty for some brigades, particularly in the periurban areas, to guarantee a response during weekdays when many of the brigade's volunteers had commuted to work in other areas. The most common solution put forward was to allow volunteer brigades to be supported by day staffing – the rostering of paid firefighters to the station to provide coverage during week days, with the station reverting to being volunteer only during evenings and weekends, when there is sufficient volunteer presence to provide the first response to any incidents.

This issue was signalled formally in 2015 via a submission to the fire services review with no action or feedback from this recommendation forthcoming.

Recommendation from District 13 CFA volunteers. (signed the four (4) Group Officers from D13 (CFA District 13) & VFBV D13 President, (approx 2500 volunteers in CFA District 13).

Recommendation: The current model of integration in general terms is very effective, there is no need to bring every brigade into full integration 24/7 (after 12 months of day manning) when only day manning is required, some brigades just need assistance during day time. A more flexible and less restrictive model of manning should be adopted; current industrial agreements reflect inflexibility of staff placement. An incentive for staff to work solely on day shift rather than rotating shifts may suit some staff.

There is no flexibility within the current industrial system to allow daytime manning to happen. The current system is to have career staff in a volunteer station for a set period of time ie 12 months and then that station must move to a 24/7 career staff / volunteer integrated station. Volunteer firefighters can manage their stations and response. It's just in some circumstances some stations need a hand during the day and not necessarily on a long term basis.

Part time or casual employment comprising of paid staff for day shift in brigades that are lacking daytime response capacity would eliminate this problem it would be far more cost effective than a 24/7 full shift paid staff manning. It also would mean volunteer firefighters would still remain actively engaged in protecting their communities. Other means of building strength in our volunteer brigades for daytime response should also be pursued.

Have any other options for a more flexible workforce been explored or considered in the proposed reform bill to improve daytime response for volunteer stations?

Presumptive Legislation

- Placing presumptive legislation into one bill to help drive the fire service reform bill through I see as a hardhearted measure, there should be no political gain in using this legislation as a lever. The presumptive legislation bill should be separate pieces of legislation and voted on accordingly.


One exposure during an incident may lead to cancer occurring. Cancer does not distinguish between career staff or volunteers therefore the legislation should reflect equal.

A lot has been done in the last few years to prevent exposure to harmful substances in terms of protective equipment, clothing, training and awareness knowledge about exposure and prevention. This all helps to reduce the risk but the possibility of exposure is still there.

- The start date 2016 for coverage is discriminatory in that it excludes many who have worked for fire agencies and have not benefited from new PPC & awareness.
- The 10 year sunset clause excludes retired firefighters (volunteer or career) that may have a cancer surfacing after 10 yrs. Latency periods for some cancers do not match ten years.
- This should be treated as a separate piece of legislation.
- A panel (unspecified make up) to decide eligibility for volunteers is discriminatory as it removes "presumption".

Thank you for your consideration of this submission.

Bill Watson AFSM.

 signed electronically).

CFA 1111639 Volunteer Fire Fighter Wonthaggi Fire Brigade

Dip OH&S, Cert IV Training & Assessment.

Service Background, 47 years Volunteer Service with CFA in 2 brigades Wonthaggi & Ferntree Gully.

Served as a brigade Captain in both brigades, Lt's positions in both brigades, Knox Deputy Group Officer, Strike Team Leader, Black Saturday Recovery Team.

Work experience predominately manufacturing in Vic & NSW in the fields of OH&S, Training and Return to Work for over 30 years. A CFA employee for 2 years Field Officer conducting needs analysis on Prevention, Preparation, Response & Recovery (PPRR) with volunteer and integrated brigades throughout Victoria.

Former National Serviceman 1970 -71 (Royal Australian Infantry & Royal Australian Engineers - Army Fire Service).

Awarded Australian Fire Service Medal, National Emergency Medal, National Medal 2 clasps, CFA Outstanding Service Medal, Honorary Life Memberships of CFA & FTG Brigade.