



LCSC@parliamint.vic.gov.au

Attention the Fire Services Bill Select Committee.

Dear Committee Members,

We take this opportunity to raise some of our concerns about the Fire Services Legislation which the Andrews Government is trying to push through the Lower House and attempted to rush through the Legislative Council.

We are a proud Rural Volunteer Fire Brigade that has been a member of the CFA since 1945 and border a Brigade which will clearly be affected by the proposed Legislation changes.

We have a membership of professionally trained and qualified CFA volunteer fire fighters, qualified instructors who train other volunteers and on occasion's staff and members who occupy positions in Incident Management teams in positions such as Operations Officer, Planning Officer, L2 Incident Controller and other support roles.

We have approx. thirty active members currently serving as Captain / Lieutenant / Secretary / Incident Controller / Operations Officer / Sector Commander /Strike Team Leader / Crew Leader /firefighters as well as support members who do not perform an operational role.

We raise our concerns as an experienced fire fighters with a good understanding of CFA and its relationship with Victorian communities.

One of our concerns is that the Presumptive Rights (Cancer) legislation does not treat paid and volunteer firefighters equally. Under this new legislation a paid firefighter with one of the 12 prescribed cancers will automatically get access to treatment and compensation. A volunteer firefighter will have to be "considered" by an unspecified panel and then may be granted compensation. Having watched the Fiskville process where members had to fight for their rights, we would hate for our families to have to go through the process. This legislation treats us like second class citizens, it is unjust.

Victoria is recognised as one of the most at risk bushfire regions in the world and as such needs one of the best firefighting capabilities in the world. The current CFA is internationally recognised as one of the most effective and efficient Fire Services in the world which services this risk, why in god's name would any sound minded person consider destroying the core fabric of this service at considerably more cost to the Victorian Tax Payers; of which we all are. This legislation splits up Victoria's firefighting capacity and potentially puts us all at risk when the next Ash Wednesday or Black Saturday occurs.

When (not if) another major fire event occurs we won't have the surge capacity to meet the challenge? It will have been eroded because those brigades we depend on have been deskilled or sidelined because they are in FRV areas or resigned due to lack of utilisation or in disgust of the proposed changes? For some parties associated with the Fire Services to suggest that volunteers won't be affected and numbers will not reduce are completely ill founded and not researched. We have been informed by multiple people from a number of brigades including our own that they will resign if the proposed changes take place. Some of those people are in Brigades who currently

provide consistent and ongoing manpower at major and/or ongoing events. Without those people those volunteer brigades will struggle to provide any sort of sustained support as they do now. Why would anyone volunteer to stay in a brigade who only provides surge capacity which usually only occurs a couple of months during the year or in the case of last year not at all!

To our knowledge there have not been any reviews or investigations that have suggested that the CFA be restructured, in fact most have praised the organisation for its effectiveness and efficiency in managing incidents. This is particularly so when talking about major ongoing and significant events. To our knowledge there have not been any inquiries into any event where the lack of skills, training or professionalism of volunteer, integrated or fully permanent brigades has been the cause of the event to go wrong. In most cases all of them have been praised. Volunteers should be recognised as fully qualified Fire Fighters which they are and not unjustifiably classed as second class firefighters when looking at response tables for incidents. To not count volunteer units which are able to respond to incidents as effective units is both insulting and demonstrates ignorance from a biased third party with a private agenda. All volunteer brigades must be counted as equivalent and used to support permanent fire fighters if they are the closest unit to the job! As areas become more populated, turnout numbers increase and response levels are at risk an unbiased review panel of local management, volunteer and permanent staff (or their informed representatives) should be used to investigate and changes to status and manning levels on a case by case basis based on the need and availabilities within that area.

We question where the funding for the proposed structure changes is going to come from and why it is necessary. Our understanding is that Victoria currently has the dearest Fire Service per population in all of Australia. Instead of restructuring brigades to make them either fully permanent staff or volunteer only, there is a need to look into the current model based the need for full time 24/7 fire stations in the outer Metro areas with a low number of turnouts (primary). Why in the case of Brigades like Pakenham and Mornington where there are sufficient numbers of trained and capable volunteers after 1800 hours until 0600 Hrs and extremely low number of calls do we need to pay for permanent fire fighters to sleep most nights when volunteers could do the equivalent job for very little cost? We believe there should be an independent enquiry to look at reducing brigades like this to permanent firefighter daytime crewing from 0600 – 1800 Hrs Monday to Friday and let Volunteers look after all incidents and fires outside those hours. In recent years, those areas were effectively managed by fully volunteer brigades, what has really changed other than daytime availability? This would save this state millions of dollars a year which could be better utilised in other areas. Conversely, if the proposed changes go through where would all of the funding for new Stations and vehicles come from? The volunteers in most integrated stations in Region 8 would choose to be relocated into a premises remote from the permanent stations. They would also need new vehicles to be provided as most of the current fire fighting vehicles would stay with the permanent stations.

Lastly we question why anyone would want an emergency service that urbanised members of the community depend on to be managed by a union, which clearly happens today. If any changes were to take place maybe it should look at why an outside organisation has so much power to veto the most basic of decisions and clearly use that power to discriminate against volunteers. We respect the right of every employee to be represented by a union but there is a point where representation turns to interference and we believe that line has been well and truly crossed. We

would not trust our current government to be able to hold an unbiased and fair enquiry which has also been highlighted by its recent history in the Fire Fighters dispute but to rush through this change without one is a disgrace. How are we supposed to work with FRV, a separate organisation with different priorities? Ask yourself a simple question, 'If a CFA volunteer crew and a FRV crew arrive at a fire, who's in charge'?

What is the motive for this dramatic change in fire services in Victoria? The Premier spoke about the stream of inquiries into CFA as a justification yet not one of these inquiries advocated for a restructure of CFA, indeed where CFA's structure was mentioned it was to support the integrated model.

Is this exercise nothing more than a very expensive strategy for Premier Andrews to sell firefighting in Victoria out to the UFU?

Finally, considering Victoria is one of the most at risk fire regions in the world and that this legislation will affect every Victorian as well as South Australian and New South Wales residents, please consider these key questions,

- 1. Do you believe that the Victorian community has been sufficiently consulted and supports this legislation?**
- 2. Are you confident that this legislation will not harm CFA's surge capacity?**
- 3. Do you believe that even with this short Inquiry that you know enough about this legislation to risk Victoria's fire safety?**
- 4. Has anyone considered the cost/benefits of this proposal?**

Thank you for considering our submission

We wish for this submission to be listed on the Committee's website.

Yours faithfully,

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