



HADDON Fire Brigade

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Brigade Captain
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To:

Committee Members
Parliamentary Inquiry-
*Firefighters' Presumptive Rights Compensation and
Fire Services Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2017*

Dear Members,

I write on behalf of the membership of the Haddon Rural Fire Brigade, a volunteer fire brigade servicing Haddon, Smythes Creek and surrounding areas within the Buninyong electorate. At our July meeting a motion was carried to complete a submission to this Inquiry, to express our extreme disheartenment and disillusionment in relation to the manner in which the recent decisions regarding the Fire Services in Victoria and affecting all members of the Country Fire Authority (CFA) have been undertaken.

As residents, voters and tax and rate payers of the State of Victoria and additionally members of the CFA, albeit volunteer, we feel we deserve the opportunity to be consulted and have our opinions heard and considered as part of a democratic and equitable decision making process. This is vital, particularly when addressing substantial issues that will have a significant effect on all of the stakeholders. It is our belief that the creation of this Inquiry Committee and our ability to submit our opinion is a first step in the right direction towards creating such a process. As such we have addressed our concerns in relation to the introduction of the above mentioned Bill, to align with the terms of reference for this Inquiry and hope that our submission will be of assistance.

Below is a summary of the points addressed in our submission.

- **Impact on fire service delivery across Victoria**
 - Secondment of FRV staff into leadership or operational roles within the CFA
 - Revision of boundaries and brigade coverage areas
- **Effect on volunteer engagement and participation in fire service delivery**
 - The adverse message being sent to both the public and brigade members in relation to the value of volunteer firefighters skills, knowledge and abilities versus those of paid staff
- **Short term and long term cost impact on fire service provision**
 - Fire Services Levy
 - Loss or reduction in available funding opportunities for CFA
 - Loss of existing valuable CFA resources

The CFA Volunteerism Strategy (2015) was created to "respond to legislative responsibilities" and under the key 'Principles' it is written, "We recognise, value and respect all members equally". Subsequently the expected outcomes of the strategy state that volunteers should feel that "their contribution is personally worthwhile, and they are respected and valued." This is certainly not the case within our

district with several other brigades also raising their concerns over the reforms. Many feel the same as we do, that such a lack of consultation and the presentation of reforms that only further the divide between career and volunteer firefighters and confuse members of the community as to the service provided, only serves to devalue volunteer brigades and the abilities, contributions and opinions of their members.

In relation to the potential for these reforms to *impact on fire service delivery across Victoria* we wish to draw attention to the issue of the secondment of FRV staff into leadership or operational roles within the CFA. We are gravely concerned as to the effect this will have on the organizational structure and leadership chain when on the fire ground and at major incidents. The Union has made it clear that those employees in this situation (operational FRV workers, seconded into positions within the CFA) although working at CFA, will subsequently be guided by regulations and covered under the conditions set out in their EBA, second to the work frame and policies and procedures of the CFA. Based on previous situations, negotiations and agreements, it is clear that this type of model will potentially create large scale complications in relation to how the two entities will work together on the fire ground and in delivering the best possible service to the community.

Further to this point, under section 48 (listed below) it clearly states that the volunteer fire service will be supported "where necessary" by paid staff.

48 - Recognition of Authority as a volunteer-based organisation

In section 6F of the Country Fire Authority Act 1958, for "first and foremost a volunteer-based organisation, in which volunteer officers and members are supported by employees in a fully integrated manner" substitute "a fully volunteer fire fighting service, supported where necessary by paid staff".

This statement is very broad and creates further discussion as to who will have the authority to determine when is necessary and what the procedures will be in such an event. For example, where a CFA volunteer brigade is the first on scene at an incident, establishes control and then FRV firefighters arrive as 'support'. If the EBA stipulates differently to the CFA Standing Orders in relation to jurisdiction, control powers or the like, there will be the potential for dispute and a substantial negative impact to the effective delivery of fire services.

There is also the issue of the revision of boundaries and brigade coverage areas. This already presents as far from a simple task and one which will cause much impact, disruption, confusion, anxiety and disillusionment. An example of this type of situation is that of the creation of the newly announced 'Lucas' Fire station (formerly named the 'Ballarat West' station) which is identified to become one of the first FRV stations in the state. The creation of this new station, has an extended and detrimental effect on the volunteer brigades that currently surround its site. Such brigades, who have been delivering initial response and support to emergency callouts effectively in this area with limited resources for many years, stand to lose much of their upcoming urban development areas (for which they are trained) when the boundaries for this area are revised. It seems counterproductive and of significant impact to the fire service delivery, if senior leadership and brigades are continually in meetings, discussions and revisions focused on boundaries and mapping, rather than delivering the fundamentals of providing an efficient and effective fire suppression service to the community. This type of situation also presents issues with the delivery of support to emergency events, in the form which organisation will have 'control' at an incident and who will be required to call for support.

Addressing the **effect on volunteer engagement and participation in fire service delivery**, as stated in the aforementioned point, if those in charge keep taking away and reducing our service areas, the message that is being sent to both the brigade members and also the public is clear. It is one that firefighters that are being *paid* are going to be much more capable than those who are only *volunteers*. We feel that this is far from the actual reality, which is that volunteer firefighters can have up to 30 or more years of local knowledge and experience in fire suppression and asset protection in these areas, not to mention the exact same training and skill level qualifications that career firefighters possess (which are obtained by devoting substantial amounts of their own personal time with no monetary reimbursement and additional hours of study and work on top of their actual paid profession). Such points are being clearly overlooked and undervalued and this is simply not good enough and blatantly unacceptable. Volunteers will as a result of this, become less inclined to join the Fire Services due to a lack of recognition and respect and membership numbers (and the subsequent ability to deliver people and services to emergency situations) will become more and more limited.

In terms of the **short term and long term cost impact on fire service provision**, the Fire Services Levy may remain unchanged this year, but what will happen in the coming years? We are concerned as to how the ongoing costs of such an extensive and expensive restructuring model will be sustained? This includes the acquisition of new land and construction of new stations for FRV and the ever increasing requirement to expand the fleet of firefighting vehicles, support units and resources and conduct new recruitment drives, training and ongoing support for staff. As these points are considered, it becomes clear that it is the Victorian people and volunteers who suffer as a result. There is the potential for the Fire Services Levy to increase in order to cover these ongoing costs. In addition, the Bill presents that the CFA services will lose valuable existing resources to be rebranded for FRV, thus effecting their capacity to deliver a high standard of service to the community. Such resources may be replaced in time, but there will undoubtedly be a period of time in the interim where this is not the case. We as volunteer firefighters may subsequently miss out on valuable and much needed government funds and grant opportunities to improve the service we deliver, due to large portions of budgetary funds being redirected elsewhere and dedicated to support costs for the ongoing delivery of FRV.

The CFA's *Volunteerism Strategy (2015)*, which was created to "*respond to legislative responsibilities*", clearly states the governments responsibility to "*recognise the value that volunteers bring to Victorian communities*" and acknowledges that CFA volunteers are "*highly skilled, team-oriented and essential to community safety*" and the "*lifeblood and heart of the organisation.*" Whilst in theory the proposal to have the CFA return to a solely volunteer organisation seems be forward progression, there are many issues resulting from this which need to be addressed. To have leaders within the current government, who disregard such integral statements and violate their stated responsibility to value and consider the voice of volunteer members by rushing legislations through Parliament, is far from satisfactory. It is simply unwarranted to present Bills for reform, without conducting a proper and considered consultation process. We feel that any such process must address the concerns of every member and stakeholder represented, in particular those of volunteers who are at the forefront of the affected organisations.

As such we thank-you for the opportunity to contribute a submission to this committee and for your time and consideration of the issues raised herein.

Yours Sincerely,

Callan Lewis
Secretary
Haddon Rural Fire Brigade