



"Simon L. Hrabe" [REDACTED]  
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To Consultation/DTF@DTF  
cc "Simon L. Hrabe"  
[REDACTED]  
bcc  
Subject Submission: Inquiry into the firefighters  
presumptive rights compensation and  
fire services legislation amendment  
(reform) bill 2017

Assistant Clerk Committees  
Please find my submission attached.  
Kind regards  
Simon

**Simon Hrabe**  
**Leading Firefighter**  
**Structural Instructor**  
**CFA North East Region- District 13**  
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Fire Rescue Victoria Submission.docx

Dear Assistant Clerk Committees,

Inquiry into the:  
Firefighters' Presumptive Rights Compensation and Fire Services Legislation Amendment  
(Reform) Bill 2017

My name is Simon Hrabe

I am:

a CFA volunteer of 27 years in a 'tin shed brigade' Little Yarra Fire Brigade in the Yarra Valley and,

a professional CFA career fire-fighter of 14 years.

I hold the operational rank of Leading Fire-fighter serving as a Structural Instructor.

I have been awarded the National and Defence Force Medals.

I began my CFA Fire-fighting Recruit Course at 44 years old, being the oldest recruit up until that time in 2003.

I proudly served in the Australian Army (77 - 89) gaining the rank of Corporal in two technical fields: cartography and electronics.

I live at Gladysdale and currently based at District 13 (Lilydale [outer-metro]) as a Structural Instructor teaching volunteers advance fire-fighting subjects. Previous to this role I held a two year posting at Fiskville Training College as an Instructor.

To-date, in my instructing roles, I have had the privilege to instruct on three CFA Career Staff Recruit Courses, one at Fiskville and two at VEMTC Craigieburn.

So I have a very good understanding of what it takes to be a firefighter both as a professional and volunteer.

So I write to express my support for the proposed fire services reform.

Victoria's fire services boundaries have not changed significantly in 60 years. Under this out-dated system, 35 areas are wrongly zoned as 'country', despite being heavily urbanised; residential and industrial. Frankston, Cranbourne, Dandenong, Craigieburn, Melton, Springvale, Boronia and Geelong are just some of the 35 'country areas'.

How can Dandenong be in the Country Area of Victoria?

I have held substantive fire-fighter positions in two of the fire stations that are inappropriately designated as country areas of Victoria; Boronia and Eltham Fire Stations, and worked for short times at a variety of other stations both on the outer fringe of Melbourne and larger urban towns in country Victoria.

These areas need to be modernised, as they are highly urbanised areas, as part of the reform of the fire service. A rapid 8 minute response, with 7 professional career firefighters on two fire trucks is the minimum standard needed in highly urbanised areas. This will allow unrestricted firefighting activities on the fire ground in these out-dated designated areas, it means the first arriving appliance can begin getting to work knowing that another fully crewed and fully trained appliance is only moments away.

While stationed at both Boronia or Eltham, with volunteer only support, we were never sure what appliances may turn up, the number of volunteer fire fighters and their level of training and their health and fitness to undertake the tasks. This is not have a go at volunteers, it is a fact of life that they are only available when they are available, and they have the skills to the level to which they can give their time, etc. Their level of fitness and mental capacities vary enormously within the volunteer ranks.

With the introduction of more capable trucks that are safer and quicker to drive as well as the upgrading of roads and the very real benefit of level crossing removals, career manned fire stations, on a 90 second response, can cover a far larger response area than when the original communities were individual communities on dirt roads. For example, a call into Bayswater or Fern Tree Gully's response area could have Boronia's career staffed appliance well into Bayswater's or Fern Tree Gully's Fire Brigade's areas while their appliances haven't yet turned out.

So by redefining the urban fire-fighting boundary to reflect the current urban sprawl will ensure those communities has the timely response it requires and the responding fire-fighters will have the timely support they need and both groups are kept safe at incidents with seven fire fighters on a minimum of two fire appliances.

Additionally, it will stop the ever increasing and unrealistic demands being placed on volunteer firefighters because of the enormous urban growth resulting in increased emergency calls and the required commitment to not only gaining more skills but to maintain those skills to a high standard.

I know because this is my job to try and prepare volunteers for the demanding role of urban fire fighter. The standards that are set for volunteer training is low when compared to the rigours a career fire-fighter has to go through to become qualified, eg; no psychological testing, no fitness testing, the length of courses, no ongoing professional development, no requirement to maintain skills or training etc.

Continually as an Instructor I am being challenged to justify the length of courses I teach as they are too long for volunteers! Professionally I find this very difficult as I know from my military experience and my own fire-fighter career the time it takes to acquire and practise skills to get to a proficient level and to maintain that level.

A career fire fighter takes; a difficult selection process, an 18 week recruit course and then a four year apprenticeship to be a qualified fire fighter!

The volunteers in these outer eastern areas can continue to offer the time they have and focus on the training required to support the surge capacity but not be required to maintain a primary urban response. They would also be used to respond to fire in the local bushland areas with their wildfire skills. And importantly maintain those skills to a high standard.

The CFA's roots are; people in local communities banding together to deal with the incidents that occur locally, that is why I am a member in my local brigade, 'because no nobody else is going to turn up'. This will continue the way the CFA operates throughout country Victoria, so for the vast majority of volunteer fire brigades nothing will change but improve with the commitment of extra funds.

Of note, in particularly the outer-eastern metro brigades; eg Bayswater, Scoresby, Fern Tree Gully, Eltham due to their physical location close to the CFA Head Quarters in Burwood, have had undue influence on the CFA hierarchy over many years. For example many senior volunteers, from varying brigades, boast about the influence they have had with senior CFA staff and the benefits it has bought directly to their brigades or volunteerism in general. It is why there are too many appliance in many volunteer stations that cannot be manned with the correct number of qualified members or at a suitable standard.

This also, I believe has a detrimental effect on the actual country areas of the CFA, as the vocal outer metro brigades continual request more and more specialised training to keep up with the career staff and to justify their relevance in the outer metro areas. The problem becomes that the training regime is then put across the state which becomes a burden to the smaller urban (country) and rural brigades. This is typified by many more advanced fire-fighting courses struggling to run in the country areas due to low numbers ('the course is too long' is the reason mostly given) but these same course are oversubscribed in the city!

In highly urbanised areas of Melbourne the amount of training that is required to gain the skills, then maintain and retain the skills and knowledge, I think as an Instructor of volunteers is quite unfair to volunteers.

And I do say to my students, "You are unpaid workers of the state so be careful how much time you put in because it is never ending". And this is borne out of the retention rates of CFA volunteers and I think it is only five years in these urban areas, whereas in local communities it will be many years.

By having all career firefighters in one new organisation it will ensure the community gets the appropriate fire cover and that the fire fighters all have the same training and specialist response standards. This will also have economic benefits for the state of Victoria as there will be one urban fire organisation rather than the current duplication.

The volunteers will be able to predominately focus on bushfire training; on the fire-ground and the high level Incident Management Team roles that they need and in the time frames they have to give.

With the CFA focussing on being volunteer only, but supported by FRV employee's both in their operational roles or Instructional roles, such as mine, will ensure they continue to get the appropriate support and training without the distraction of having career staff in the same organisation.

And the evenness of training will occur across the state and be relevant rather than the CFA trying to address career staff, outer-metro volunteers and the wider volunteer training.

While on-station (turning out as an operational fire-fighter) there have been many issues and situations that show the current situation in the response area of the 35 integrated stations under question needs revising.

For example, the training provided for volunteers in these urban areas is initially wildfire based so volunteers have no training in a number of urban response subjects for example;

Motor Vehicle Accident response. There were many a time our career staffed appliance was supported by a volunteer appliance that only had one or two at most out of a crew of five that had any training or experience regarding MVAs. Totally unacceptable on high speed roads with a number of vehicles involved, it left us all vulnerable.

Hazard Materials (Hazmat) response. A number of times both as arriving first on scene or arriving second in support of a volunteer appliance inappropriate decisions were made by the volunteer appliance crew potentially putting the volunteer crew in danger. This is directly related to lack of training for the urban environment, which due to the efforts of career fire fighter is being slowly addressed.

I personally found that this current round of CFA Career Staff EBA negotiations very stressful both at work and at home as they have become a political football. I have been continually questioned by the public; family, friends, people off the street when I am in uniform and by students when conducting courses.

Given the volunteer hostilely whipped up earlier and the continued lack of trust by volunteers locally, even though they will lose nothing, I have not given my time or expertise with the local brigade as I feel I am the enemy and any comments or inputs I give will be viewed through the distorted view of this disagreement. With the formation of two separate organisations one for volunteers and one for employees it will address this issue.

This current round of negotiations has dragged on for a number of years and has led to this situation as the volunteers have interfered in the Federal Award System.

Unfortunately the 'tail is wagging the dog' with volunteers having a direct and *continual* say in my pay and conditions and how a very important emergency service is run.

Neighbourhood House volunteers do not have veto rights for the pay and conditions of Vipol members! Or the Chief Commissioner told how to do his job.

It is also very important for the ongoing protection of the Victorian population that an impartial set of criteria are applied to when a town/location moves from a volunteer fire service to a career fire service. This aspect of the Review is very important and will bring it into line with other states having an impartial view rather than having a number of volunteers sitting on the CFA Board overseeing these decisions.

So I respectfully submit that you give consideration to my request to modernise the fire service along with the introduction of presumptive legislation laws to protect fire fighters. Both are needed to be endorsed and implemented by Parliament before the commencement of the fire season.

I am very looking forward to this situation being finalised so I can get on with enjoying my job once more, developing professionally and training volunteers to a high standard but not having my pay and conditions subject to the continual interference of volunteer organisations.

Yours sincerely

Simon Hrabe

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