



26th April, 2017

The Hon David Davis
Chair
Standing Committee on the Environment and Planning
Level 4, 55 St Andrews Place
East Melbourne, Vic. 3002

Dear Chair

Re: VFBV Submission to the Parliament of Victoria Inquiry into Fire Season Preparedness 2016 Response to CFA Rebuttal Submission

I am writing to you in response to a rebuttal submission made by CFA CEO in letter dated 16th March 2017 to the 'Parliament of Victoria Inquiry into Fire Season Preparedness 2016'. In that letter the CFA CEO referenced spatial modelling developed by VFBV in conjunction with University of Melbourne Centre for Disaster Management and Public Safety, analysing incidents attended by CFA over a five day period in January 2014. The letter (16th March 2017) claims VFBV submission appeared to convey a message that 28,500 volunteers responded to 1600 fires in those five days and that this message is misleading. The letter goes on to state CFA is concerned 'that the Inquiry and the public generally is provided with accurate data and analysis of that data which appropriately reflects the important contribution of volunteers during emergencies'. I am seriously concerned to ensure the Standing Committee does not interpret this inference by CFA as suggesting VFBVs claims about the essential role CFA volunteer capacity provides to Victoria's capacity to respond to major incidents is somehow incorrect or overstated.

It is wrong to suggest the VFBVs presentation of the data is misleading and it would be wrong for the committee to discount the importance of the observations made by VFBV and/or the strength of the data and evidence supporting this observation. I wish to make the following formal response to the CFA CEO letter.

- CFA incident statistics are readily available to demonstrate the dependence on CFA being able to mobilise and sustain high numbers of trained and experienced volunteers to perform firefighting, incident management, support and other roles.
- CFA incident and response data shows evidence of an increasing need to rapidly deploy and sustain large numbers of trained volunteer resources and a need for this surge capacity not just for high profile events such as the Black Saturday fires but each year for the numerous days when thousands of trained CFA volunteers need to sustain both local service delivery and also deploy to major emergencies throughout Victoria.
- In Victoria there is an intrinsic relationship, particularly in the context of CFA, between the approach to fire service delivery in outer metropolitan Melbourne and sustaining the volunteer capability required to prepare for, respond to and recover from major fires/emergencies. The vital importance of volunteer capacity from outer metropolitan Melbourne was well recognised by the 2009 Bushfires Royal Commission and all major recent inquiries/reviews. Council Assisting the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission advised

that emergency management arrangements in Victoria should be managed cognisant of two key and interdependent aspects, these being how the changes improve Victoria's ability to (a) manage bushfire prone areas (including preparing for and responding to major fires); and (b) service Victoria's expanding urban fringe and growing regional towns.

- The CFA volunteers currently servicing outer metropolitan Melbourne contribute the large portion of Victoria's vital volunteer surge capacity that is required for peak load, high consequence major emergencies.
- With regard to the VFBV submission to the Standing Committee referencing a five day period in January 2014 (January 14th – January 18th):
 - The visual modelling provided to the Standing Committee referenced 30,000 'personnel'. For the sake of clarity this number represents the number of 'personnel deployments' not unique individuals. For example if an individual was deployed three times during the five day sample period this counts as three personnel deployments. The video of the sample five day period presented by VFBV to the Standing Committee is available on VFBV website and the voice over and text now clarifies '30,000 personnel deployments';
 - The actual headcount of unique individuals attending incidents captured in this five day time period is 11,909. A number of individuals attended multiple incidents during the five day period. 98% of these individuals are volunteers; just under 30% of personnel deployments were by volunteers from greater metropolitan Melbourne ;
 - The data quoted by VFBV for this five day period understates the actual volunteer activity in that it does not count volunteers who turned out to fire stations in response to the incident alert and ready to activate to the fire ground instantly if required. Nor do the figures count volunteers on standby at fire brigades throughout the state, a typical occurrence during periods of high fire activity.
- This data is drawn directly from CFA provided information. A limitation with the CFA data is that extracting information for this five day period does include incidents that started before the five day sample period or continued after the five day sample period; this complexity should not overshadow the core message which is about the reliance of Victoria's emergency management arrangements on the CFA volunteer based and fully integrated service model; the importance of being able to mobilise large numbers of trained and experienced volunteers to multiple large incidents at the same time being able to maintain service capacity back in the local brigade service area; the large reliance on volunteers from the greater metropolitan area to provide Victoria's essential surge capacity; and the reality that this is five day sample time period is typical of many busy periods each year.
- The CFA CEO's letter to your committee indicates that CFA calculates 6,497 unique volunteers were dispatched to fires during the five day sample period. Whilst VFBV data analysis suggests that the actual number is more like 11,909, rather than focus on the difference between these numbers, the point that must not be lost is that the evidence shows that sustaining large numbers of trained and experienced volunteers is essential to Victoria's emergency management capability and fire season preparedness. Maintaining and building CFA's volunteer capacity is essential for public safety. Anything that discourages or erodes Victoria's volunteer capacity now or in the future will jeopardise Victoria's fire season preparedness, diminish Victoria's capacity to deal with emergencies and will put the safety of Victorians at risk.
- It is widely accepted, and able to be evidenced by CFA incident data, that the CFA volunteer based service model including the integrated volunteer/paid CFA service model in Melbourne's growing urban fringe is fundamental to Victoria having the capacity to mobilise

the large numbers of highly trained volunteer firefighters required for peak load and surge capacity associated with major state level emergencies, including bushfires. Major incidents can occur at any time of the year and are more frequent during the summer months or 'fire season' as referenced in this inquiry.

- In response to evidence I have read and various public comment recently, VFBV is concerned that there may be plans afoot to make changes to the current CFA volunteer based and fully integrated service model, the structural arrangements between CFA and MFB and/or the service model to be applied in the greater metropolitan area and provincial centres. Any such planning would affect Victoria's fire season preparedness and therefore is directly relevant to your Committee. It would be extraordinary and extremely concerning if such planning was occurring without formal consultation with VFBV in accordance with the CFA Act. It would also be disturbing if such change was being contemplated without involving experts such as the CFA Chief Officer and the Emergency Management Commissioner. Sworn evidence to your Standing Committee by Victoria's Emergency Management Commissioner Craig Lapsley stated that he is not doing any work on changing the CFA service model or boundaries or work on amalgamations between the CFA and MFB and that there is nothing on his remit to look at changing legislation or changing organisations. I am hopeful that your Committee is abreast of these issues and can provide assurance that the current system is to be maintained. Any change that discourages, displaces or erodes volunteer capacity and capability will jeopardise the safety of Victorians.

Yours Sincerely



Andrew Ford
Chief Executive Officer