

Debate on the future operation of the CFA

Situation normal

For most years, most of the time the CFA is able to carry out its function for local and small scale operations, in spite of reduced volunteer numbers. This is in what would be described as 'normal' conditions of humidity, wind speed and temperature.

Bad days

However, in conditions described as Catastrophic, which involve high temperatures and strong and gusty winds, the best efforts of the CFA volunteers have not been enough to stop the destruction of homes and businesses which seems to be a regular feature in what we describe as a 'bad year'. In reality, it appears there will never be enough personnel and vehicles to outrun a fire fed by a gusty 100 kph wind in hot and dry conditions, even in open grassland, let alone hilly bush land. The reasonable community expectation is that these bad days will increase in frequency and dwellings and businesses will continue to be lost.

There appear to be an extraordinary amount of ignitions that occur on bad days and the public are largely left in the dark about the cause of these, further creating a climate of fear as to their safety.

Deadly policy

On Black Saturday people were advised to shelter in their homes and many perished in undefended homes. This was not a good policy and it has since been replaced by a different one which seems crafted to absolve the CFA management of any responsibility and places the onus on the untrained public to abandon their cherished homes and telling them they are lucky to be alive.

The current situation

- The current approach regarding private (and public) infrastructure could be described as Retreat and Abandon, the public are advised to leave, leave early and this is supported by advertising designed to frighten rather than inform. Their policy is one of simply reducing the public expectation of help to a very low level.
- There is no policy or ambition to protect community assets by the CFA management such as Hotels, Post Offices, Halls etc. - if there happens to be a truck available at the right time on a bad day it would be sheer luck.
- The CFA has a policy of not supporting safe, defensible local places and discourages the use of them! This increases the number of vehicles on the road and increases the risk of accidents when emergency services are already stretched.
- There is no support or recognition for private fire fighting systems
- Insurance premiums are increasing rapidly, and some people can't afford them. The policy of abandonment and inevitable destruction will fuel this cycle.
- CFA volunteers who seem to be increasingly losing their own homes receive no material support from the CFA, an absolute disgrace.

The limits of the CFA

On normal days, the CFA is able to do what it was intended to do, but the CFA resources appear to be stretched to the limit on these bad days. They do their best and they have some wins but the toll grows and there seems no hope that this situation will improve under the current system.

Some suggestions for discussion and debate re CFA

- Re CFA volunteers losing their houses: Legislate to make the CFA legally liable to replace volunteers houses from their budget, and to also house them while their houses are rebuilt. It might even encourage people to join!
- Re insurance premiums: Redirect the CFA money spent on fear-mongering advertising to subsidise insurance premiums.
- Re insurance premiums: advocate for houses with active and passive fire-fighting systems

- for a reduction in premiums
- Re wire rope barriers on freeways: conduct an enquiry, involving the brigades as to whether the barriers on the left-hand side are a hazard to fire-fighting and emergency services personnel as well as restricting brigade access to suppress fires.
- Open up the CFA training facilities to approved members of the public to become trained in the use of fire-fighting equipment and use of personal PPE.
- Reform the CFA policy regarding the use and support for local places of last resort and enable training for auxiliary organisations to manage these places.

Re asset protection work that is outside the CFA's current capability on bad days

There are many able-bodied people in towns and locations who are quite capable of operating fire fighting equipment with training to defend fixed assets, including their own homes. These people might not want be in the CFA brigade but could perform a useful role in freeing up the local brigades options.

Some suggestions regarding supporting the CFA with auxiliary organisations

- Create auxiliary organisations that defend identified community assets, with equal legal protections that apply to CFA volunteers. Some organisations like Hall committees already exist so they might be an extension to the Hall Committee.
- Identify community infrastructure that is essential to a town or locality, if that is a private business, liaise with the owner.
- Supply equipment, training and PPE to auxiliary organisations
- Hold community meetings to enlist able-bodied people who are prepared to support an auxiliary organisation.
- Enable secure storage locations for movable equipment during the non-fire season so it's not stolen! Most equipment would only be moved on-site during a high-risk period.

Some suggestions regarding supporting fire protection on private dwellings

- Enable training at CFA training institutions for private house holders for them to gain recognised certification in use of fire-fighting equipment
- Enable CFA instructors to advise in best use of equipment in specific situations/localities, and provide the usual legal protection afforded to such advice
- Form a universal system of assessment for private fire-fighting systems based on criteria: (1) defence time against ground fire front (2) Defence time against ember attack (3) existence of gutter protection- either steel mesh or flood system (4) adequacy of water assets
- Provide education on research into causes of building ignition and destruction

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