

5 July 2017

Assistant Clerk Committees
Department of the Legislative Council
Fire Services Bill Select Committee
Parliament House, Spring Street
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002



Dear Chair,

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

The VFF welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the inquiry.

VFF members have a self-evident interest in the restructure of existing fire service provision. Farmers in Victoria own the majority of land in the state and are caretakers of that land. They make up a large part of the CFA volunteer force that is called on to fight fires and protect lives and buildings in regional and rural Victoria.

Historically the VFF has been cautious about changes to provision of fire and emergency services in Victoria; there is good reason for this. We consider the system to have been largely effective over time. We also have a view that considerable risks to human life and Victorian economic security arise where the services are mismanaged and not appropriate to the needs of the community.

The VFF does not oppose the principle of an efficient restructure of fire services focused on an outcome of better services for all Victorians but is far from convinced that that the current proposal will result in a better outcome for the community. An underlying concern is that the proposed changes are being undertaken for the wrong reasons. It would seem that the review and restructure has a starting point of a desire to enable an EBA to be progressed rather than a starting point of delivering the best outcomes for the community as a whole.

This leads us to a view that there are considerable risks to address in the restructure process. These are outlined below.

1. Fire services in regional and rural areas must be in a better (or at least not a worse) position as a consequence of the CFA reform process
2. The government should be able to demonstrate the tangible medium term benefits of the proposed changes to the rural sector
3. Rural landowners and residents must not be subject to rises in cost through the Fire Services Property Levy or other charges in the medium term
4. Rural landowners should not be required to fund services in a proportion that is inequitable vis-a-vis metropolitan rate payers. The lower populations of rural and regional Victoria should not shoulder a greater burden for a cornerstone public good.
5. The safety and security of Victoria's people must never be at risk either during any reform, interoperability changes or as an outcome of the reform.

The VFF makes a number of observations on the following matters:

- Further operational detail will be important to understanding the proposed service.
 - The direct effect on volunteer brigades
 - The split of the fire services levy particularly how the levy will be apportioned in shires that will have Fire Rescue Victoria and CFA brigades.
 - Details of how the board of inquiry will work and the costs involved.
 - Changes to volunteers operations in integrated stations.
 - The administrative burden on the CFA
- The role of volunteering must be valued and supported
- Consultation processes during implementation
- Ongoing funding streams and appropriate resourcing must be guaranteed
- The cost of provision of services must not rise unreasonably for those in rural and regional Victoria
- Interoperability arrangements between the two peak fire authorities
- Government commitment to diversity is commended
- Omnibus bill

Further operational detail will be important to understanding the new service

It should be noted there is insufficient detail in the legislation and proposed reforms to gain a clear picture of the operational realities of future service provision. We acknowledge that many of the concerns we have may relate to the operationalisation of the system rather than the legislation itself.

The role of volunteering must be valued and supported

Volunteering and the ongoing community responsibility for fire safety in rural and regional Victoria is an excellent example of the mutual interests of rural people, the public and the general community. The role played by volunteers in fire and emergency safety is a critical public good. There would be no way for the government to achieve its aims more cost effectively. Reform must keep this in mind and the role played by those who volunteer must be highly valued and supported.

Ongoing funding streams and appropriate resourcing must be guaranteed

Any change to the CFA, and especially resourcing and funding models, is of critical concern. In addition, the contribution of VFF members to the fire services property levy is already significant. The VFF acknowledges the government will establish a \$56.2 million CFA Support Fund and an Emergency Services Infrastructure Authority funded to approximately \$44 million. The government has been clear that short term funding for the CFA will be secure.

We require the government to outline the long term plan for funding an appropriately resourced CFA. The VFF considers the cost of replacing CFA volunteers with career firefighters remains unclear and seeks further clarity on this.

The cost of provision of services must not rise unreasonably for those in rural and regional Victoria

Given the lack of clear funding arrangements beyond those announced by the government the VFF seeks assurances that the CFA not become the 'poor cousin' in favour of Fire Services Victoria. The division between the services must not become a quality issue, for example in training, brigade support and equipment.

The VFF will strongly oppose any rise in the CFA levy which falls disproportionately on farmers as major landowners.

Interoperability arrangements between the two peak fire authorities

The VFF seeks more clarity and detail about future interoperability arrangements for the CFA and FRV. Interoperability has been a long term strategic issue for the two services. Improved use of resources and deployment of funding is important and interoperability is vital to continuing good communication and operations through Victoria.

We encourage the government to set expectations for both services to pursue cooperation and cost efficiency across the services. The most unfavourable outcome of reform would be an unnecessary cultural divide between the two services for Victoria, resulting in inefficiency. The government has given assurances that the reform to fire services will mean more flexibility and a better connection between both agencies. It is critical that performance measures and reporting standards are established by the government to demonstrate improved outcomes.


Government commitment to diversity

The government has announced plans to quadruple the number of women in CFA brigade leadership roles from 265 to 909 over four years. The VFF commends the government on this excellent initiative to improve diversity in the CFA. The VFF takes this opportunity to recognise the effort and service of those women who have contributed to fire services in Victoria through the decades.

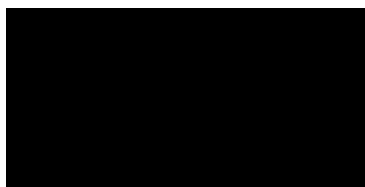
Omnibus bill

THE VFF has already publicly expressed its serious reservation at the decision to combine the compensation aspects of the legislation with the restructure of the fire service of Victoria. In this case the convenience of omnibus legislation has risked considerable public scepticism about the legislation.

In closing I would make the observation that the trust placed in the Government regarding the handling of the CFA has been severely degraded. There is a lack of information and operational detail that the proposed changes will have on volunteer brigades, the collection and distribution of the FSPL and the transition to the new structure. This lack of information in an environment where trust is at issue will exacerbate the nervousness within the community. Providing additional information and details of the implementation and transition to the new model is essential to obtaining community support.

I thank you for the opportunity to comment. Please contact me if you wish to discuss or Simon Arcus, 

Yours sincerely,



David Jochinke
President
Victorian Farmers Federation