

Dear members of the appointed Senate Committee into the Firefighters' Presumptive Rights Compensation and Fire Services Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2017,

My name is Simon Thomson; I am a CFA volunteer of almost 15 years service and a proud and grateful recipient of the National Emergency Service medal for my service during the black Saturday fires. I am also currently the 4th Lieutenant and Communications Officer of the Little River CFA. Outside of the CFA, I am an IT Consultant who is in senior leadership roles as an IT Architect on large-scale business transformational programs of work. I currently reside in the community of Little River and work in Melbourne, but my career also takes me all over the world. I would also like to point out that I am not a member or affiliated with any political party, union or any other representative organisation.

I am writing in relation to your terms of reference and ask that you please take my concerns into consideration:

1. Impact on fire service delivery across Victoria

I believe that initially there will not be an impact to the delivery across Victoria by the legislative changes; in its current form I feel there will be more long-term erosion – a cancer is a good way to put it. Over time the FRV integrated stations will grow and quietly CFA volunteers will leave. We will end up with stations that host a CFA appliance that doesn't respond and then we will have another campaign fire and this will put an un-preceded demand on the services. People will ask what has happened and by then it will be too late.

With the increase of FRV across the state, we will see from a rural perspective, the continuing and expansion of career staff responding with inappropriate appliances to rural areas. Currently in our area, when we receive calls to the North of the Little River community, it is not uncommon for Hoppers Crossing staff to respond with their pumper. There is no water out our way, nor are the roads suitable for such appliances. These appliances are useless for such fires and will run out of water within 60 seconds – for a fast moving grass fire that is of no use. Further, these crews often arrive in structure ensemble or a mix of wildfire and structure clothing – this also places them at greater risk of heat exhaustion. We have even had cases of Corio CFA staff arriving with the Teleboom in the past. We have attempted to address these issues with district management, but to no avail, often with a response of “we need a guaranteed response”.

Increasing FRV to the rural urban interface may increase fire-fighter response, but what good will seven fire-fighters and a pumper be for a running grass fire in a paddock where a pumper cannot go? I think this rushed legalisation has not addressed the future interoperability between services at any detail, neither has it addressed how the rural urban interface will be managed in the best interest of the community. We volunteers are only interested in looking after our communities and if this type of legislation is not done correctly the community will be at risk. I ask you to consider this; how effective will and can, an FRV Senior Station Officer working overtime at an outskirt FRV station, who has spent their entire career based in a CBD station called to a large running rural grass fire, being first on scene be in a position to be an effective incident controller? I am not trying to downplay anyone's skills, but with this legislation there will be more and more FRV stations on the interface running fires – the current Emergency Services Minister and incumbent political leaders tell us it will be fine, but we, as experienced rural fire-fighters are extremely concerned.

2. *Effect on volunteer engagement and participation in fire service delivery*

Morale of volunteers:

With the outcome of this legalisation it is proposed that both FRV and the CFA in some cases will be co-located within the same station. I feel this will be a problem for the morale of volunteers with them being segregated, treated like a second class citizens and I know they will be on the receiving end of abuse and bullying by many professional fire-fighters who are aggressive and not sufficiently trained to deal with these matters.

Over time this will become too much for many volunteers and they will leave this very important service – demarcation will occur in stations, people will be given cold shoulders, FRV professionals will squeeze out the volunteers. These activities will directly impact the service delivery of the CFA by hurting its surge capacity and its ability to respond to fires, as there will not be the numbers. This bullying and morale reduction is already evident within areas and the CFA know this. I suggest the committee discuss these types of issues with the members of the Lara Fire Brigade who have recently been locked out of the office in their own station by CFA staff, and have been informed by the D7 OM that when

staff arrive they will not be able to use their pumper, even though they do now and are qualified. I might add, that the same OM who has also publicly stated that there are no problems in Geelong when in fact there are. If the senate is going to pass this legalisation, I believe that they should return it to the lower house with an amendment to provide a clause that when a station is to become an FRV response area, the incumbent Brigade makes the decision if they are co-located with FRV. This should be completed independently by secret ballot overseen by EMV. This will ensure morale is kept within the current brigade and treats the volunteers with respect.

Being Managed by FRV

By having the FRV staff seconded back to the CFA to manage the volunteers this will absolutely create an 'us vs. them' mentality. This will occur on both sides whether we like it or not. Decisions will be clouded and not made in the best interest of government, community and volunteers. Currently these Operations Managers are all members of the UFU and covered by an EBA - not common law work contracts. Their decisions and directions are not based on logic or in the interest of the community or volunteers. We will have directions given to the CFA members by these people and decisions made will whether we like it or not often with UFU or FRV preference. This is human nature - to protect what is yours.

I will give you another example of the Lara CFA in which I recently was informed off. Recently the current CEO of the CFA and Chief Officer of the CFA visited the station with the D7 Operations Manager - during this meeting it was advised that Lara will become FRV at some stage. The CFA CEO and CO, with the OM present, advised that if the brigade did not want cohabitation, then they would look at an alternative site for FRV. Once these members departed (CEO and CO), the D7 Operations Manager got them back together and advised that the brigade cohabitation is the only path forward. This same person, under the new structure, will be seconded back to the CFA making decisions and directing volunteers. How can we expect these decisions to be made in a fair and reasonable way?

I am concerned these decisions will be made in a manor that is in the interest of the UFU and expansion of FRV not the community. The more FRV expands, the more UFU members will exist – this fact cannot be disputed. And the more FRV fire-fighters complete courses they will then be in a position to be seconded back to CFA to manage volunteers propagating an endless cycle.

If the senate is going to pass this legalisation, I believe that they should return it to the lower house with an amendment to provide a clause that the CFA is not obligated in any way to take its paid staff positions from FRV personal. These positions should be advertised externally to both volunteers and general public, EMV personal and all other Emergency Services in Australia for applications. There are a number of highly skilled people in which CFA is currently missing out on. This is the opportunity to change the culture and ensure there is a good mix of people to ensure our organisations and the general public get the best out of taxpayer money.

3. Short term and long term cost impact on fire service provision

Cost to tax payers:

As a Victorian, I am very concerned about the budget and fiscal management. I am extremely unhappy that these pieces of legislation are un-costed and rushed. We, as taxpayers, have absolutely no understanding of the true cost to all Victorians now and in the long term. This legalisation needs to be fully costed and fully transparent to all Victorians. As a CFA Volunteer I am very concerned that in a few years time, crucial funds will be diverted to FRV from the CFA to pay for a large number of professional fire fighters and their equipment demands, leaving CFA members with old, out-dated equipment. This may end up being an unintended consequence due to the lack of long term costing, but until we fully understand the costs of this, it should not proceed.

Fire Service Levy:

The fact that the government has not dealt with this issue in this legalisation shows that it does not know what the cost is and what to do. As a taxpayer this feels like a familiar story – something is pushed through by government without understanding the implications and in two years time we will see the fire service levy increasing to pay for all of

this or, cuts that will be sold as “not effecting front line operations” but we all know they will. I also feel extremely concerned for farmers and the current cost of the levy – should this increase it will place difficult hardship of people when it shouldn't. What I do propose is if the senate is going to pass this legalisation, I believe that they should return it to the lower house with an amendment to provide a clause to ensure that rural people should not have increases outside of official government CPI and that houses inside the FRV response area should be paying considerable more than rural people for the guaranteed response if their property is <1000 square meters.

4. *Underlying policy rationale.*

I have to say that this current approach to policy by this current government is disappointing and perplexes common people. I often talk to people in my workplace and community and the message from people I talk about is “Wow how can this be happening” We are country who accepts democracy well and always except the decisions of elected government but a line is being crossed here. We are at the crossroads in society with politicians, every day people are become more and more less engaged. And to have our current government dismiss people who disagree with them, throw toys out the cot because a higher level of government exercised its right to basically say go back to the drawing board on the EBA, then to wakeup and try to push a un-costed and non consulted major change that, effects our entire state smells and it is not right.

I have to say that my brigade has had no engagement and/or visitation from CFA directly (R7 OM, ACO, CO or CEO) or either of our two local labour members. Further to this being part of the Geelong area to my knowledge Little River CFA were not invited to attend the briefing with EMV, CFA CO in Geelong on 18th June as publicised in the media.

In closing I ask these questions of the committee taken directly from the CFA Volunteer Charter to take into consideration with this legislation:

- Is it fair?
- Is it just?
- Is it reasonable?
- Does it discriminate against Volunteers?

- Is the outcome practicable or sustainable?
- Is it in the best interest of the safety of the Victorian Community?

I think if these questions were asked in relation to this legislation and were considered without party lines and in conscience the answer will be evident. The legislation in its current form should not be passed. Taking into account that although our current system is old and absolutely needs to be looked at and improved; a divisive, politically motivated, non-engaged piece of legislation is not the answer. Had this legalisation come from a review or via a series collaborative forums it would be more comprehensive and CFA volunteers would back it. This committee will be judged by history – perhaps I am overstating it but I ask you not to propagate a government who does not engage with communities and removes people from positions who do not agree with their agenda. That is not democracy.

I sincerely thank you for taking the time to read my submission and giving me the opportunity to state my thoughts on the current legislation in such an important forum.

Yours sincerely,

Simon Thomson