

2/7/17

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

INQUIRY INTO THE FIREFIGHTERS' PRESUMPTIVE RIGHTS COMPENSATION AND FIRE SERVICES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (REFORM) BILL 2017

Dear Assistant Clerk Committees

I am a Senior Leading Fire fighter with the Country Fire Authority and I have been employed since 1981, I have over 36 years as a career fire fighter and 5 years prior to that. That makes of 41 years' experience as a fire fighter. I was also a junior fire fighter from the age of 11 to 17. The CFA has been a part of my entire life as my father was also a fire officer with the CFA and I grew up on a fire station at Geelong City.

I currently live in Bell Park which is in the Corio fire district, and I currently work as a structural instructor for district 14 and can be required to train volunteer fire fighters anywhere from Werribee up to Mildura (the North West Region).

I am writing this submission in support of the proposed reform of the fire services for the following reasons:

Changes to CFA area, population growth & surge Capacity

Over the last 41 years I have seen a lot of changes in the CFA, but none more so than the increase in the number of integrated fire stations across the state. In 1976 there were approximately 15 integrated stations across the state, now we have over 35 integrated stations across Victoria. This has occurred due to the massive growth in Victoria's population growth. Volunteers do a great job in protecting our community from fire and emergencies but they too work and have family lives and only have so much time they can give.

The MFB / CFA boundaries were created over 150 years ago when the country area of Victoria which was covered by the CFA really was the country area. Now the CFA covers a massive area of high population growth. This has resulted in a corresponding increase in the number of fire calls in the CFA areas, increasingly the volunteers in these areas who do a great job have found it harder to reliably respond to every incident in there fire area. That is why we have had a growth of integrated fire stations in the CFA.

During the summer fire season the volunteers at Point Cook have always been able to respond the tanker to strike teams or for wildfires in the district. If the restructure were to go ahead there will be no change to this because the volunteers will still be available to respond as volunteers of the CFA. The Point Cook CFA volunteer fire brigade will not be disbanded; they will still be available for surge capacity within the CFA.

The reform areas are around the 35 integrated stations primary response areas there will be no effect on other volunteer brigades or bushfire response.

Minimum Manning levels for responding Appliances

It is important to the safety of firefighters that when there is a fire call there is a minimum of 4 career firefighters on the primary response vehicle and that sufficient appliances are responded to have a guaranteed response of at least 7 career firefighters. To explain why this is important I can tell you of an experience I had a few years ago where we only had 3 staff on board of the primary response vehicle. We were responded to a structure fire which was a double story house with the rear section on both levels were totally involved. The 3 crew were made up of one officer who was the incident controller, one pump operator and myself, I was required to enter the building with breathing apparatus and a hose line to make an initial attack and conduct a primary search for casualties. This is against all safety practices and the Standard Operations, but we had no choice. Before the next appliance arrived I had to make an emergency exit from the building as the roof started to collapse. We now have a minimum of 4 on an appliance which was part of the latest EBA claims which have now been implemented by the state government. This minimum manning level is important not only for the safety of firefighters but for the safety of the community because without the correct manning level on the fire ground it is unsafe to conduct internal fire fighting activities and searches.

Minimum manning levels for initial response to the fire ground

The EBA which has not yet been signed off also has a safety level requirement for a minimum response of 7 career fire fighters to initially respond to every incident. This is also required for safety reasons to provide a safety back up for the initial responding firefighters.

Career fire fighters already respond in support of volunteer only fire areas to assist them in there firefighting efforts. This has been occurring for a long time and normal procedures dictate that the incident controller at the particular incident can cancel the supporting appliances if they are not needed, however if they are need for safe fire fighting operations to continue the incident controller knows he has a guaranteed response and back up.

If the fire service restructure were to occur, the only thing different to what happens now is there will be a minimum of 7 career firefighter (instead of 4) initially responded to support volunteer brigades.

As under the current SOP's the volunteer incident controller will continue to run the fire call in his own fire district, nothing will change if fire service reform goes ahead.

Standardisation across Victoria

If all the career staff in both the CFA & MFB became one fire service (Fire Rescue Victoria) it would allow for a consistent approach across the whole of Victoria in regards to skills and technology, The reform will assist with standardisation of career training/specialist response/response standards and equipment etc, this is a good thing for community safety and protection.

Increase to training capabilities and infrastructure support.

As part of the creation of Fire Rescue Victoria the CFA will also receive extra financial resources which includes and increase to its training capabilities. The New EBA allowed for the introduction of a third structural and a third Wildfire instructor for each district. This increase in the instructor base will allow more training to be delivered to the volunteers of the Country Fire Authority.

The reform will benefit volunteers in many other ways as it will included a package to assist with volunteer recruitment and retention across the CFA; and includes funding for volunteer station upgrades etc.

Volunteer Support Remains

Volunteer support will be maintained with operational firefighters, which include Operation Officer's, Operations Manager's Instructor's etc being employed by FRV will continuing their roles through an arrangement with CFA. Those employees will continue to wear a CFA uniform, essentially it just means that nothing will change.

Industrial dispute damage

Over my 36 year as a career firefighter I have never seen such a nasty derisive dispute as what has recently occurred. The disputes in the Kennett era in the 90's were nothing compared to what has occurred over the last few years. This recent dispute was a personal attack propagated by the Liberal party / Herald sun and the VFBV onto the career firefighters of the CFA. The blatant lies and accusations made against career firefighters were unprecedented. I personally was abused by members of the public who believed the rubbish printed in the Murdoch press, I was called a thug / greedy and many other things. I along with many of my colleagues was reluctant to wear our fire service uniform out in public for fear of being abused. I have never seen the work force morale down so low, but yet through this whole time we never let the public that we have devoted our lives to serve to be affected. We continued to respond to fire calls, we continued to respect and support the volunteer members in our brigades even in the face of the disrespect and abuse from other volunteers in brigades who were fed lies by others. This dispute placed a lot of strain on many members home and personal lives with some firefighters own children being bullied by other children at school simply because their father was a career firefighter.

As far as the amendment to the fair work act made by the federal LNP, this has allowed a situation where an entire work force will never be able to ever get there EBA signed off unless it is agreed to by 60,000 volunteer firefighters with in the CFA. This in effect removes any chance for any improvements to the safety of firefighters and the community through the negotiations and agreement of an EBA. This is unprecedented in Australian history and is undemocratic.

Yours sincerely,
Ken McKeegan