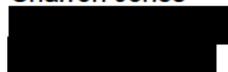




Mansfield Fire Brigades Group

Group Officer: Fred Forrest
Secretary: Sharron Jones



Select Committee Submission

Mansfield Fire Brigades Group

5th July, 2017.

The town of Mansfield is situated in the High Country of North Eastern Victoria. Mansfield Fire Brigades Group represents and supports the 12 Brigades in its catchment area. These Brigades, broadly, protect the lives and property of townships and hamlets within this boundary, including the Alpine settlement of Mt Buller, and supplement responses to Brigades in neighbouring catchments.

Much of the area served by the Mansfield Brigades and Group is classified under the bushfire overlay as Extreme in this, the most fire prone part of the State of Victoria. Our country is mountainous and heavily forested with summer storms starting many fires from lightning strikes.

The population is comprised of 50% permanent residents and 50% weekenders and swells with holiday makers both in winter for the snow fields and summer for Lakes Eildon and Nilhacootie. Campers and 4WD holiday makers in the bush throughout the catchment area, create an additional layer of concern for community safety.

Bushfire is the reality of our area. Our Brigades are highly trained and work together effectively to minimise the potential devastation that these bring. In light of this, the two terms of reference dealing with service delivery will form the focus of this submission relating to the Firefighters' Presumptive Rights Compensation Bill and the Fire Services Legislation Amendment (Reform) 2017 Bill.

Impact on Fire Service Delivery Across Victoria.

Secondment Model:

The role of the Mansfield Group is one of coordination, resourcing and monitoring well- being and performance of the Brigades under its control when fires threaten. The Group, staffed by volunteers also requires the input of the middle management of the District at these times to activate air support, sometimes catering for firefighters, the supply of heavy machinery for the construction of containment lines etc. It is essential that these middle managers, who are currently CFA employees, are competent, are familiar with the area in which the fire is running, know and have empathy with the volunteers controlling the fire from their Local Command Centre, have wildfire fighting experience,... the list is long.

In recent years, Mansfield Group has been assigned numerous Operations Officers to work in the catchment. The shortage of staff causing this churning has meant the Group has not been well served. *The secondment model proposed by this Legislation will only exacerbate this situation.* Recruiting middle management from the ranks of FRV, a totally urban based organization will supply people who, with the best will in the world can not be equipped with the attributes mentioned above that will be essential for the protection of our communities from wildfire. **The secondment model will negatively impact fire service delivery in Victoria.**

Training:

Wildfire fighting demands specialist knowledge and skills, not only in general practise but also of local conditions. Many of the wildfire trainers currently employed by the CFA have entered the service via lateral entry. The secondment model proposed does not allow the CFA to draw from other services like DELWP and SES nor from its own volunteer ranks. Trainers from the urban areas may be proficient within their experience – they can not possess the learning necessary to develop safe, competent and confident members of rural brigades. **Training under the model proposed in the legislation will be inadequate for fire service delivery in Victoria.**

Those volunteers who have completed advanced training in AAIMS, level 2 courses for command centres, etc. are facing uncertainty as to whether they will be able to use this knowledge under the proposed new structures. Should their skills not be used in the new structure of the CFA, this will constitute an enormous loss of talent and resources to serve the communities – **a loss to service delivery in Victoria.**

Surge Capacity:

The dismantling of the integrated brigades will destroy the surge capacity they provided for large campaign fires. These fires can not be fought by local brigades alone. The campaign fires in the Group area of 2006-7 and 2009 clearly illustrated how essential this resource is to the controlling of wildfire. **Without the ability of the integrated brigades to provide the surge capacity, fire service delivery in Victoria will be seriously weakened.**

UFU Conditions in the CFA:

With the reemployment of middle managers from FRV to CFA under the secondment model, Mansfield Group has a very real fear that the conditions demanded by their yet to be presented EBA will be restrictive to the Group's brigades' ability to fight fires.

A case in point – The resort on Mt Buller is comprised of millions of dollars' worth of infrastructure and on any one night during the snow season houses over a thousand visitors. The Brigade at Mt Buller needs more firefighters on the Mountain than live there. The CFA is unable to supplement these volunteers because their *current* EBA does not permit them to live up there in the present fire station.

With the expected new FRV UFU EBA, is it little wonder that the Group has grave concerns about the fire service delivery in Victoria under its conditions?

Effect on Volunteer Engagement and Participation in Fire Service Delivery.

Morale amongst the volunteers in the Brigades and the Group is at its lowest ebb in memory. The source is the uncertainty of their future and the future of the organization through which they have a commitment to serve their communities. Several occurrences have brought about this uncertainty. A couple of examples will suffice to illustrate.

Lack of Consultation:

Most volunteers are aware of the provisions of the CFA Act and the Volunteer Charter that require the government to consult with them in matters that affect their functioning as a fire fighting service. The announcement that the CFA was to be split, that their managers would belong to the new FRV and be governed by the UFU through a yet to be proclaimed EBA and seconded back to the CFA

left them bewildered and angry. They felt the very controls by the UFU that they had fought so long and hard to resist would be imposed. They are aware that no models for finance, training, leadership, have been developed or discussed with their leaders. They see the disillusionment of their mentors, who have given a lifetime to serving their communities, being treated with contempt. **Who could wonder at the negative affect this lack of consultation has on their willingness to engage and participate in fire service delivery?**

Treatment of the VFBV in Contrast to the UFU

The collective voice for the volunteers in the Mansfield Group is the VFBV to which each Brigade and its members are formally affiliated. Volunteers witness the denigration of their representative body and the lauding of the leaders and members of the UFU by the Minister, Premier and the Union hierarchy. **This disempowerment of the volunteers leaves them wondering to whom they can turn for the fulfilment of their rights to have a voice in the way they will engage and participate in fire service delivery.**

Firefighters' Presumptive Rights Compensation Bill

The contrasting opinions as to the fairness of the treatment of volunteers under the Bill as it is written has increased uncertainty about their rights should illness strike them as a result of their service to their communities. The opinions of Mr Jack Rush QC, a person who is greatly respected amongst all volunteers, but particularly in the North East where he is well known, are dichotomic to those of the Minister, the Premier and others for whom there is an absence of respect amongst the volunteers. Morale is further reduced to an extent in some Brigades where members will no longer give up salary, holidays or family time to turn out or travel across the state on strike teams. **They are disengaging from participation in any but local fires that threaten their own or neighbouring communities.**

Short Term and Long- Term Cost Impact on Fire Service Delivery.

At a Group level, the CFA provides funding for tankers, some operational vehicles, some equipment and much of the basic infrastructure. It provides the salary for a support officer who will not move to FRV should the legislation be passed. It pays some of the running costs such as fuel and provides an allowance for some of the administrative costs of the Group, especially connected with the Local Command Facility. The contact most Brigade members have with financial matters relates to fundraising for equipment, amenities, etc that the CFA does not finance. However, they have concern about the impact that the spending associated with the setting up of FRV will have on their Fire Service Levy. They are concerned about the reinforcement of the CFA that all money raised by Brigades and Groups belongs to the CFA because they foresee the possibility of this being externally controlled. **The lack of financial plans associated with the proposed changes to the CFA only adds confusion and uncertainty to the volunteers which in turn impacts negatively on morale.**

Underlying Policy Rationale.

The Brigades in the Mansfield Group are at a loss to understand the reasons for the creation of FRV except for their fear that it is a political move by the government to allow the UFU to impose its vision of a fire service conducted under the conditions of their EBA on the Victorian community. They believe:

- the joining of the presumptive legislation with the fire services reform legislation is a cynical move by the Government to coerce parliamentarians to pass the bills for fear that they will appear hard hearted in rejecting the cancer compensation for ill firefighters.

- the statements that inquiries have recommended the updating of the CFA through splitting off the integrated stations are not supported by the written reports handed down. They know the inquiries recommended the strengthening of the integrated model as a way to economically protect larger communities.
- the secondment model will impose the UFU clauses on the CFA through the seconded managers and further emasculate the leadership of the CFA.

In conclusion, the officers of the Mansfield Group and the Brigades they serve are dismayed at the presentation of the legislation that will change forever the organization to which they have committed so much. Thank you for your time in reading this submission.

On behalf of the Executive of the Mansfield Fire Brigades Group.

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