

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

Submission to the Inquiry into the firefighters' presumptive rights compensation and fire services legislation amendment (reform) bill 2017

Submission from: Geoff & Joy Howley,

[REDACTED]

We are CFA volunteers in the Caramut Brigade in south Western Victoria which is part of CFA District 5 and I make this submission in support the small rural brigades that are wholly formed with volunteers.

Experience demonstrates that the action of UFU members already impacts on the running of these brigades and that the additional changes proposed by this legislation will further impact on the efforts of volunteers to protect their own and other communities.

For some years the local CFA volunteers have tried to work with and accommodate many operational procedures imposed but not related to our conditions and terrain. The recent debate around the EBA and now with this proposed legislation have highlighted that volunteers are being pushed too far in this regard and they feel worn down by demands that have little or nothing to do with preventing fire damage – their driving reason for being a volunteer.

The local rural volunteers have an inherent (from a farming background) and trained understanding of controlling these fires, also learnt in the miles and days spent burning fire breaks and attending fires.

Their minds are focused on controlling and safely putting out the fire. They are driven by a common goal – to protect their community and its assets. Many of whom also provide, at their own expense large tankers and/or slip on units.

Fires move extremely fast over these grass plains and have proven uncontrollable unless fire fighters can get to a fire within minutes of it lighting up. Experience demonstrates that fighting grassland fires requires an immediate strong response. The quicker, and the more trucks, that can attend a grassland fire the more hope of controlling it.

Along with attending grassland fires, bushfires, house fires, road accidents, plane accidents members of the local Brigades in this District are also responsible for hundreds of kilometres of controlled fuel reduction or fire prevention burns. They have also been members of Strike Teams fighting around Victoria and in fact Australia wide.

They are dedicated and efficient group, with enormous practical training and experience gained in real fire operations.

However in recent decades the task has become increasingly difficult as changes were made to operational orders. Growing demands on volunteers that have been caused from “bush fire” inquiries and union requirements, imposed physically, culturally and actually miles away from our local volunteers and their community’s requirements. This has put at risk the very being of the CFA with

volunteers increasingly frustrated by growing irrelevant, to dangerous, changes that impact on the 'on the ground' operations.

The increasing lack of regard for volunteers has many feeling frustrated and disappointed.

- A changing culture within the CFA in last decades has already given a 'taste' of what will come should this proposal be written into law. I believe that is why this legislation and previously the EBA is being fought so hard by volunteers.
- Training requirements have become too onerous for many rural brigades, the distance to training and elongated courses are a major deterrent.
- The volunteer Group Officers authority has been usurped by paid members of the CFA. Group Officers have the most direct route to volunteers and the on the ground workings of the CFA.
- Through the District Planning Committee the Group Officers, who are the senior group of volunteers, need constitutional power and authority to be able to contribute, influence and improve the volunteer Brigades capacity. This Group has been supplanted by levels of bureaucracy that are removed from on the ground operations. Currently Group Officers have no constitutional power to make recommendations to the Board / CFA/ Government. The current EBA will exacerbate this type of problem.
- Local Brigades are struggling to maintain equipment and volunteers capable of protecting communities and are frustrated by the lack of co-ordination and sensible targeting of funding expenditure. Bureaucratic requirements that have little to do with "actually putting water on fires" are hindering the capacity of rural brigades.
- The declining number people willing to become volunteers is a concern. Very much more effort is needed to understand how personnel can be both gathered and deployed by the CFA. Recent EBA discussion are causing added problems in attracting and keeping volunteers.
- The CFA has lost many from senior roles and left the volunteers feeling under threat. Operational command is an on going concern, as volunteer commanders have had their authority questioned or removed when paid fire fighters are in attendance.
 - e.g. when a strike team Commanding Officer was removed from a plane of volunteers going to NSW because 2 paid employees would not accept his authority. Or when equipment is withheld because of a UFU veto that was not relevant or reasonable

The real concern of country communities is how they are best protected from fire. For most communities and properties the CFA volunteers are the only fire fighters who stand to prevent a calamity. Volunteers should be able to operate under the most effective conditions for them, most definitely not rules and regulations imposed for completely different conditions.

If the rules are onerous and out of context there is a risk of volunteers being put at risk and/or even facing litigation when just trying to protect their community and help others.

The economic value of the community volunteer is huge, if their role is reduced and replaced by a paid service it will require a huge increase in public funding. Why? When the community can be protected by volunteers like the CFA and SES - are we even having this debate. Volunteers deserve to continue to be treated as vital and valued members of their community and encouraged in their role.

It has been heart wrenching to see CFA volunteers involved in a fight they do not identify with, after all they joined the CFA to fight fires not union appeasing legislation and an EBA. They are clearly hurt by the way that they are being treated.

We appeal to the select committee to demonstrate a real understanding of the past and future role of community volunteers by encouraging and respecting their contribution and protecting their ability to manage their own destiny.