



Volunteer
Fire
Brigades
Victoria



Victorian Urban Fire
Brigades' Association



Victorian Rural Fire
Brigades' Association

Joint Submission to National Bushfire Inquiry

Prepared by

Allan Woodward

CEO

Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria
Level 2, 4 Lakeside Drive
Burwood East Vic 3149

Tel: 9886 1141

Mob: 0418 506 378

Fax: 9886 1618

e-mail: allanwoodward@vfbv.com.au

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Executive Summary

VFBV supported by the VUFBA and VRFBA advances the interests of 58,000 Victorian fire brigade volunteers in Victoria's CFA.

This submission to the National Bushfire Inquiry covers issues of land management, water conservation, environmental management, infrastructure and equipment management, and volunteer issues.

VFBV's submission is summarized by the following:

In relation to land management, volunteers:

- believe that there is benefit in reducing fuel loads, particularly in areas prone to high fire danger.
- have concerns about enforcement of obligations on landowners to reduce risks to life and property
- support further research, possibly through the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre, that would promote science based recommendations.

Water conservation issues raised included:

- the general closing in of irrigation channels which may restrict access to water for fire fighting purposes,
- concerns about sources of water for firefighting and the raising of awareness of this need with water conservation policy makers.

Environmental management issues raised include the need to protect water supply quality following bushfires.

Infrastructure management and equipment issues focused on:

- increased attention to maintenance of road and bridge networks, fire trails and mapping systems
- support for the National Aerial Firefighting Strategy
- support for a national approach to firefighting equipment purchase if this can result in cost savings, and
- support for a Federal Government role in planning, support and recovery in relation to major fires.

In discussion of volunteer issues, matters raised included:

- appropriate funding for the national association of volunteer firefighters,
- support for national initiatives that considered tax rebates to volunteers to offset out of pocket expenses involved in volunteering,
- consideration of a model for compensation to employers and self employed persons similar to the Army Reservist Employer Support Program.

Introduction

Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria (VFBV) advances the interests of all Victorian fire brigade volunteers. There are some 58,000 volunteers in Victoria's CFA¹ who collectively contribute time valued at \$480 million per annum.

This submission is made on behalf of volunteers and incorporates the views of the Victorian Rural Fire Brigades' Association and the Victorian Urban Fire Brigades Association.

Land Management

Support for fuel reduction burning

Volunteers have voiced concerns that intense fires have serious, negative impact on both people and the environment and that steps should be taken to reduce fuel loads to better manage the impacts of fire. Views put are that intense fires

- create adverse weather conditions creating danger to humans,
- cause more damage to the environment, and
- increase safety risks to firefighters engaged in controlling the fire.

With very intense fires, peculiar weather effects are created by the fire conditions alone. CFA volunteers involved in the Gippsland fires reported that the fires were so intense in some areas that their updrafts created hurricane force winds which flattened large (1m²) road signs held up by two 50 mm diameter galvanized iron poles. These weather conditions created by intense fires would create safety risks for firefighters.

Some volunteers have indicated that hot intense fires resulting from high fuel loads may also have greater ecological impact through sterilization of the soil and destruction of native grasses with subsequent soil erosion caused by wind and rainfall.

Concern about rural landowners suffering economic loss through being burned out has also been expressed. These economic losses have flow-on effects to the community.

There is concern that high fuel loads may result in hotter, more intense fires which are more difficult to control and present increased safety risks to workers. It would seem that by keeping fuel levels lower, risks are lower.

Comment has been made that that if fuel loads are reduced by 40%, flame height is also reduced. This means that if fires do occur, there is less impact on small animals and the canopies of trees. The resulting ecological damage is reduced.

Volunteers believe that there is benefit in reducing fuel loads, particularly in areas prone to high fire danger.

¹ Country Fire Authority, Victoria

Responsibilities of property owners

Following from the above argument, land needs to be managed in ways to reduce risks to life and property and owners of that land have a responsibility for action.

A view expressed by volunteers is that there doesn't appear to be anybody who is responsible for enforcing and following up these requirements.

Volunteers have suggested that we need local watchdogs who can monitor implementation of required action perhaps with the authority to enforce regulations. One suggestion was to strengthen local government to allow more responsible policing through Municipal Fire Prevention Committees.

It is suggested that the focus needs to be on reducing the risks rather than penalizing the disobedient. A system that passes on costs to have the job done is a suggestion that could help create a safer community. It has been suggested that such a system should apply equally to government departments, local municipalities and private landowners.

Keeping the fuel reduction debate in perspective through research

Volunteers monitoring the public press have noted that arguments about fuel reduction burning have ranged from strong environmentalists views to equally extreme *slash and burn* mentality. Volunteers would prefer an intelligent approach based in research and logic where the benefits, or otherwise, and methods of conducting fuel reduction burning are discussed and implemented. Volunteers also recognise the important and valued role of CSIRO fire scientists who have, in the past, provided information on land and fire management.

Volunteers have commented that land management programs could be broadened to include concepts such as selective timber management right through to pastoral leases for cattle in the high country. Whilst some may argue that cattle cause degradation of the high country, it has also be argued that grazing in the high country may reduce fuel loads and improve weed reduction. These issues could be further resolved through research.

It is suggested that the Bushfire CRC² might be an appropriate organisation to produce recommendations on the efficacy of fuel reduction burning. This would assist in making decisions based on science rather than opinion.

There could also be clearer public information and education of the need for and benefits of fuel reduction burning based on these scientific findings.

² Co-Operative Research Centre

Water Conservation

Volunteers have raised issues relating to conservation of water supplies for fire fighting purposes and raising of awareness of this need with water conservation policy makers.

Loss of irrigation channels has negative impact on firefighting

Both the Victorian and New South Wales Governments have joined together in a program to return a flow of water to the Snowy River. The water conservation strategy includes general closing in of open irrigation channels in the Murray irrigation system.

There are concerns that this could have a negative impact on fire fighting operations. In North West Victoria, irrigation channels have provided fire tankers with ready access to water when needed for firefighting purposes. The general closing in of these channels can restrict access to water in fire emergencies which may endanger the safety of firefighters and the efficiency of rural fire services. Such situations can also increase risks to private property owners who may need access to water to protect themselves.

There is a concern that water supply for firefighting purposes doesn't seem to have been sufficiently elevated as an issue in water conservation policy.

Honeysuckle Creek Reservoir, Victoria.

The possible decommissioning of Honeysuckle Creek Reservoir south east of Violet Town in Victoria's North East seems to be an example where water for firefighting purposes doesn't seem to have been considered in policy formulation.

Goulburn Valley Water is responsible for the reservoir which previously supplied drinking water to Violet Town. This has now been supplied by another means. Whilst some argue that the dam wall may not comply with construction standards³, others argue that the dam wall is sound, but the spillway does not meet today's standards⁴. If the reservoir's capacity were reduced by one third through remodeling of the spillway, it would meet required standards.

Ultimately, it is Goulburn Valley Water's decision on what to do with this water resource. The influencing factors include cost. It is claimed that the cost of remodeling and ongoing maintenance is too great and, understandably, this seems to be the driver behind the intention to decommission. However, there are others who would argue that the cost of remodeling the spillway is similar to the cost of decommissioning. It seems that further analysis may be needed.

A major concern in this particular case is that broader community needs for the water supply, particularly for fire suppression purposes, have not been taken into account. Rather than decommission the reservoir, volunteers feel that the dam could be remodeled and reduced to an appropriate capacity for not much more than the cost of decommissioning and the reservoir could continue to be available as a water resource for firefighting.

Volunteers have also expressed concern that Lake Mokoan at Benalla is also proposed for decommissioning.

³ Letter from CFA 7 May 03.

⁴ Personal communication, Liz Battye

Whilst the decision to decommission a water supply is rightly the prerogative of the water authority concerned, volunteers feel that a generally increased awareness of the need to include water for firefighting purposes in water conservation policies is required.

Environmental Management

Protection of water supply quality

When fires occur, considerable ash and debris is created which finds its way into our river systems and ultimately into our water supplies. For example, with the fires in North East Victoria, the impact of ash and debris has been evident as far down as Wangaratta.

Concerns have been expressed by volunteers about the effect of ash and debris on aquatic life and water quality. With oil spills, there are boom systems that help to keep the water clean. It is hoped that similar systems could be employed to keep water systems free of ash and debris.

Volunteers have also noticed the massive soil erosion that occurs on steep areas of bare earth following bushfires. The silt which enters our rivers and streams affects not only water quality but water storage facilities also.

As part of risk management and recovery after a bushfire, volunteers would prefer that water authorities or land management authorities consider taking steps to protect water supplies and keep them clean.

Infrastructure Management and Equipment

Access

Volunteers and fire authorities are coming under increasing occupational health and safety pressure to regard the fireground as a workplace for OH&S purposes. In various states, this legislation invariably requires employers to provide safe access and egress to the workplace.

For firefighters in country areas, this means having adequate entry to and escape from the fireground on roads and bridges that are capable of supporting the weight of a 3,000 litre, 4 wheel drive tanker. They also need access to maintained fire trails and environmental damage through erosion of fire trails following bulldozing during a fire could be avoided if adequate maintenance was performed before or after the fire season on these fire trails.

Some volunteers feel that insufficient attention is paid to road structures and fire trails in the high country before and after fires. There is ultimately a dollar cost involved in this but this cost needs to be balanced against health and safety needs.

If there are changes to road and track conditions, this information could be made available to firefighters through improved and updated maps. Such map improvements would be assisted by the availability of satellite imagery currently available to the military.

Volunteers request that the Inquiry appropriately raise attention to maintenance of road and bridge networks, fire trails and mapping systems.

Aerial firefighting appliances

The use of aerial appliances for firefighting appears to have been successfully used in Victoria. It provides the ability respond quickly to control fire in remote areas that are difficult to access by conventional means.

Volunteers have expressed a preference that these appliances be resourced on a national basis rather than by individual states on their own. This would allow deployment of aerial firefighting resources where they are needed without one state carrying the burden of the cost, or worse, duplicating the services beyond what is required.

Volunteers support the National Aerial Firefighting Strategy.⁵

This is felt to be a role for the commonwealth government.

Provision of equipment

No-one would disagree that adequate equipment to fight fires is needed. However, volunteers have expressed a view that through the adoption of standardized equipment across Australia, economies of scale could spread available financial resources further.

The average cost of a 3,000 litre, 4 wheel drive tanker has increased 11.0 per cent per annum over the last three years highlighting the increasing cost of equipment. However, if standardised equipment design could be achieved across Australia's fire services, it is likely that considerable cost savings could be made.

There is support for a national approach to firefighting equipment purchase if this can result in cost savings.

Role for the Federal Government

Volunteers have suggested the Federal Government could have a valued role in coordination of planning, support or recovery in relation to major fires. Whilst the States have responsibility for fire service management, the impact of a major fire disaster is similar to the impact, for example, from terrorist attack. There could be a need to assist coordination between the states or to assist with recovery afterwards.

Whilst the Federal Government supports emergency management through EMA⁶, some volunteers have suggested this role for the Federal Government could be expanded. For example, coordinating access to satellite technology utilised by the Armed Forces could help

⁵ Hon Wilson Tuckey, 2 April 2002.

www.ministers.dotars.gov.au/wt/releases/2002/april/wt16_2002.htm

⁶ Emergency Management Australia

the tracking and control of fires. Providing funding to assist communities to recover after a major bushfire could help to offset the economic flow-on effects of major disasters. Alternatively, a nationally coordinated approach to mapping could assist a variety of agencies in the work they do. Such support might be coordinated through appropriate nationally based organisations.

Volunteer Issues

Appropriate funding for national volunteer association

Volunteers have raised the issue of appropriate funding for the national association of volunteer firefighters.

In Victoria alone, CFA's 58,000 volunteer firefighters contribute time valued at more than \$480 million per annum which is three times the annual cash budget of CFA. These figures are for Victoria alone and the national volunteer firefighting contribution could be in excess of \$2 billion per annum.

With this level of national volunteer involvement, there is a need for government support for a national volunteer association of firefighters that can coordinate the inputs of the various state level volunteer associations.

In 2001, the Government expended funds on the International Year of Volunteers and one of the legacies was the production of a future strategy document by Volunteering Australia⁷. The first item in this strategy was *to publicly respect and value, in enduring, formal and tangible ways, the essential contribution that volunteers make to building and sustaining the Australia community*. The paper argued that the infrastructure that supports volunteers merits funding.

Volunteer firefighters in Victoria have expressed support for The Australasian Assembly of Volunteer Fire Brigades' Associations (AAVFBA) as an appropriate organisation that could develop and present national views. However, this organisation appears to have no government funding to support a secretariat and their continued work.

It appears that EMA⁸ provides travel and accommodation support for the Australian Emergency Management Volunteer Forum to conduct quarterly meetings. It is suggested that financial support of a secretariat would assist organisations like AAVFBA to prepare appropriate submissions, possibly in conjunction with relevant fire authorities, on fire service volunteer issues.

Volunteers would ask the Inquiry to consider appropriate funding for the national association of volunteer firefighters.

⁷ Volunteering Australia, Inc. *A national agenda on volunteering: beyond the international year of volunteers*. 2001

⁸ Emergency Management Australia

Volunteers and tax rebates to offset out of pocket expenses

Volunteers are firm in their view that they don't want to be paid for their services because it undermines the volunteer ethos. This has been reflected in draft VFBV policy⁹, but on the other hand, volunteers do not want to be out of pocket. This is the same view which emerged at the EMA Volunteer Summit in 2001¹⁰: volunteers expect to donate their time, but they would prefer not to be out of pocket.

Volunteers incur out of pocket expenses in

- purchase and maintenance of uniforms and equipment,
- travel to and from fire calls, training and meetings, and
- communication expenses such as telephone and mobile phone costs directly and necessarily incurred in firefighting.

Some of these costs may be reimbursed by the fire authorities for travel to state level meetings and for communications costs of brigade officers. But it occurs only for a few who give their time to travel to state level coordination meetings.

For the majority of volunteers, they meet their own travel and communications costs for the privilege of serving their communities. Some volunteers would argue that this is their contribution to their community yet the majority would value initiatives from the federal government that would offset these costs.

Tax rebates could be an appropriate way to recognise volunteers' contribution to the emergency services and off-set the out-of-pocket expenses incurred by emergency service volunteers. There is an argument that differentiates emergency service volunteers from other volunteers:

- If volunteer scout masters didn't turn up to run their scout and cub group meetings, what would be the impact?
- If volunteer firefighters didn't turn up to fight the Victorian North East and Gippsland fires, what would have been the impact? An estimated fire damage cost of \$840 million to \$1.2 billion¹¹.

Volunteers have suggested that a tax rebate is possibly a more equitable way of recognizing volunteer contribution because is not dependent on income or employment status or the claiming of actual expenses against other income. The details of eligibility would need to be clarified but a rebate could, for example, be linked to acquisition of minimum skills that could be validated by a certificate from the fire authority.

It is possible that such a rebate would also have a positive effect on recruitment of volunteers into the emergency services. Large numbers of rural volunteers are baby boomers who will reach retirement age over the next 10 to 15 years. Without an incentive to encourage younger people to join, volunteer emergency services could be placed at risk. Such as view

⁹ Draft VFBV Policy: Volunteers and Payments. Due for finalisation in June 2003.

¹⁰ EMA. ***Value your volunteers or lose them: a national summit for volunteer leaders/managers.*** Canberra, 11-12 October 2001

¹¹ This is based on assumptions that if the perimeter of the Victorian fires had extended a further 10 kilometers, an estimated 12,000 houses could have been lost. Based on a replacement value of \$70,000 to \$100,000 per structure, the replacement cost is estimated in the order of \$840 million to \$1.2 billion. This does not include any of the economic flow-on effects that would be experienced in the communities where losses are sustained.

is consistent with EMA whose Director General agrees that sustainability of volunteerism is under threat¹².

If the annual amount of rebate were, for example, in the order of say \$200 to \$300 per volunteer per year, the cost based on Victorian volunteer firefighters alone would be \$11.6 to \$17.4 million. But this appears relatively small when compared with the CFA volunteer contribution valued at more than \$480 million per annum and the potential loss of 12,000 houses in relation to the North East and Gippsland fires conservatively estimated between \$840 million to \$1.2 billion.

Volunteers would support national initiatives that considered tax rebates for volunteers to offset the out of pocket costs involved in volunteering.

Impost on employers and loss of income for self employed volunteers

Employers

In order to provide a volunteer emergency service, employers are frequently called upon to release employees who are volunteers. Many employers, but not all, also choose to support these volunteers by paying them while they attend the emergency. This payment may be in the form of paid emergency service leave or other negotiated arrangements including annual leave, sick leave or time-off-in-lieu.

During the recent Victorian fires, employers released employees who were volunteers for up to five days at a time. When the fires continued and volunteers sought another five days leave, many employers responded, "*Haven't you put it out yet?*" Volunteers feel there was reluctance to allow another five days leave. It could also have reflected the impost felt by employers.

Volunteers have commented that employers need to be compensated in some way for this commitment, but that it should not conflict with the volunteer ethos nor should it imply endorsement of a '*retained firefighter*¹³' concept which is opposed by volunteers in Victoria.

Self-employed

Some volunteers who are self employed suffer a loss of income when attending to fire calls. For example, accountants and tradespersons are unable to earn their income when they necessarily attend fire calls to protect their communities. If they take five days away from their business to support a strike team, they are making a considerable sacrifice.

Similarly, farmers when called away on strike teams will often employ relief milkers to milk their herds, or relief farmers to watch their live stock. It may not be possible for other family members to undertake these tasks if the farm owner is the sole employee and other family members are necessarily involved in off-farm jobs to supplement their family income to sustainable levels. In these situations, some farmers actually pay for the privilege of volunteering. Amounts of up to \$50 a milking or \$100 per day have been reported.

¹² EMA. ***Value your volunteers or lose them: a national summit for volunteer leaders/managers.*** Canberra, 11-12 October 2001, p. 57.

¹³ Retained firefighters is a model used in NSW and elsewhere where individuals are paid a monetary retainer to attend emergencies and undertake training.

One volunteer in Gippsland is self employed in a small engineering business where he is the sole employee. Because this individual necessarily volunteered for strike teams in his home area, the consequence was that he fell behind in his production schedule and this impacted on his contractual obligations. He is now unable to fulfill his orders and may lose future contracts as a result.

These examples are provided to convey illustrations of how volunteering impacts on the self employed. It can be argued that all of these volunteers had a choice and could have said no. But the reality is, when the flames seem to be licking at the door, it is never quite that simple.

These volunteers have received considerable training and are highly skilled in firefighting. They know that they are probably a limited number of personnel who are available to do this job and they find it incredibly difficult to say no to a strike team request when they feel the need is so great. These individuals are more likely to suffer a personal financial loss than to say no to the strike team request.

Whilst the Commonwealth Government through Centrelink has provided compensation in the past for cases of hardship, these have been one-off instances for particular fire related events rather than an ongoing program.

Some volunteers have expressed difficulty with the concept of payment in such instances because it conflicts with the volunteer ethos and may inadvertently imply endorsement of a 'retained firefighter' model. But compensation could be offered in another form that does not conflict with the volunteer ethos.

The Volunteer Ethos

This can be summarized in the following statements:

- Volunteers give freely of their time without expectation of payment to contribute to their communities in not-for-profit organisations.
- Volunteers are opposed to payment for their services because this would make them employees which is antithetical to the whole concept of volunteering.

A Possible Compensation Model

Compensation could be paid to employers and self-employed persons who release volunteers to attend emergency services training. This concept is similar to the Army Reservist Employer Support Program¹⁴ where employers are reimbursed for releasing employees for routine training.

Such a system would:

- offset employers' costs in releasing employees for necessary training,
- allow volunteers to give their time freely,
- preserve volunteers' choice of attending an emergency,
- provide employers with similar choice of releasing (or volunteering) workers for emergency incidents,
- avoid conflict between compensation and the volunteer ethos, and
- avoid covert endorsement of the retained firefighter concept because payments are made to employers to offset the costs of releasing their workers.

¹⁴ www.defence.gov.au/reserves/

The Inquiry is asked to give consideration to this suggestion as a means of offsetting the cost to employers and the self-employed.

Conclusion

VFBV, VUFBA and VRFBA thanks the bushfire enquiry for the opportunity to raise issues that are important to volunteers.

Volunteer representatives through VFBV would be interested in invitations to participate in further discussion or working parties to assist in consultation with volunteers or to provide feedback concerning implementation of the Inquiry's recommendations.

We look forward to the reviewing the Inquiry's findings.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "A. Woodward". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "A" and a long, sweeping underline.

Allan Woodward
VFBV CEO