

FIRE WISE

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Postal Address: PO Box 714, Drouin Vic. 3818
 Telephone: (03) 5605 8451, Mobile 0402 051 412
 Email: gordon@fire-wise.com.au
 Website: www.fire-wise.com.au

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Office located at: 118 Jackson Drive,
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Challenging and rewarding

by Commissioner Craig Lapsley,
 Emergency Management Victoria

The past year has been both challenging and rewarding in many respects.

We have experienced fires, storms, floods, mosquitos, landslides and an unprecedented thunderstorm asthma event, which sadly resulted in the loss of eight lives.

In our first peak fire day for the summer we battled heat, fires, wild winds and storms, all in the one day. In the north of the state, working in 40 degree heat, firefighters battled 47 fires sparked by dry lightning, while close to Melbourne a thunderstorm asthma storm peaked with 1900 calls for ambulances in a five hour period.

During the past year the emergency sector has worked together to prepare for, respond to and recover from the diverse range of emergencies. We now need to ensure we capture the learnings and ensure they are incorporated into the reform being driven across the sector.

Although the past year has been full of challenges, I have been impressed by the commitment of the sector to improve and create an emergency management system that is joined up and sustainable, which we all know means change and challenging the norm in creating a better future.

Although it may not feel like summer yet for many parts of Victoria, we are prepared for what the revised seasonal outlook is predicting as an above average fire season across most of the state. Due to spring rains there has been prolific grass growth that, when dry, will become fuel to burn, which is why urban interface areas are at particular risk.

At the start of December we launched the Summer Fire Awareness Campaign, which focusses on prompting all Victorians to be better prepared for extreme weather conditions across summer including

bush and grassfires, extreme heat, smoke health, and water safety.

Planning and preparedness is fundamental to good decision making. When it comes to safety, decisions must be black or white, or the consequences could be serious.

This year we welcome three new Chief Officers into the sector, and into the role of the State Response Controller (SRC). The SRC is appointed by the Emergency Management Commissioner (EMC) to lead and manage the response to emergencies such as fires, floods, rescue and hazmat, which are deemed as Class 1 emergencies.

Working from the State Control Centre, the SRC operates on a year-round roster and ensures control arrangements, response planning and integration with recovery efforts. Their goal is to ensure the safety of the community through effective response, and assistance to affected communities to help them build resilience and resettle after an emergency.

The SRCs are agency Chief Officers and Deputy Commissioners:

1. **Stephanie Rotarangi:** Chief Fire Officer, Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMV). Stephanie has 20 years experience in forest fire management and fire operations, and was previously New Zealand's Otago Rural Fire Authority Chief Executive and the region's Principal Rural Fire Officer - New Zealand's highest operational rank.

2. **Steve Warrington:** Chief Officer, Country Fire Authority (CFA). Steve was appointed CFA Chief Officer on 30 June 2016 after more than 35 years in emergency management. He was previously a Deputy Chief Officer, a rank he had held since 2007 across both the Readiness and Response and Emergency Management portfolios and is a Level 3 Incident Controller.

BUNYIP STALWARTS RECOGNISED

Contribution by two stalwart members was a highlight of Bunyip Fire Brigade's recent annual dinner.

A special moment during the evening was the presentation of a 70 year medal to 'Joe' Cumming. All of his service has been with Bunyip Fire Brigade, including distinguished leadership as Captain for 31 years and Foreman as seven.

A brigade and CFA life member, Joe still attends meetings and retains an active interest in competition down at the local 'Joe Cumming Training Track'.

During the evening a National Medal presentations took place with **John Beavis** receiving a fourth clasp to his National Medal. This equates to more than 55 years of active and diligent operational service with 50 of these spent with Bunyip Brigade where he was Secretary from 1969 to 1997.

- continued on page 10



Bunyip Fire Brigade's John Beavis (left) and Joe Cumming.

3. **Trevor White:** Chief Officer, State Emergency Service (SES). With many years of operational experience with both VICSES and CFA, Trevor is responsible for the development of operational doctrine and overseeing incident management capability development within VICSES.

4. **Paul Stacchino:** Acting Chief Officer, Metropolitan Fire brigade (MFB). Paul joined the MFB in 2010 as a Deputy Chief Officer and is currently MFB's Acting Chief Officer. He has more than 35 years of emergency management experience, working in three fire agencies in two states of Australia and in North America.

5. **Tony Murphy:** Deputy Commissioner (EMV). Tony Murphy was the former MFB Chief Officer, former strategic adviser to the Fire Services Commissioner and is cur-

rently the Director Capability and Response and Deputy Commissioner to the Emergency Management Commissioner.

The SRCs provide leadership and support to the regional and incident controllers and across the emergency management sector before, during and after emergencies.

The SCR works with the EMC as part of the State Emergency Management Leadership Group, which is broad and reaches across all emergencies that Victoria will face.

It's important to know that the SRC on any day could be managing at state level storms, fires, floods, rescue and hazmat regardless of their agency badge. This is all part of our multi-agency approach to emergency management.

VFBV WELFARE FUND HELPS OVER 1000 VOLUNTEERS

SINCE ITS CREATION by the Victorian Urban Fire Brigades Association in 1913, the VFBV Welfare Fund has now helped 1079 volunteers in need, distributing more than \$1.4 million in small assistance grants. VFBV State President Nev Jones says the volunteer-run Fund has expanded in recent years, giving small assistance grants on a confidential basis to more than 300 CFA volunteers since its expansion in 2008, with over 92% of all applications approved.

"The old urban brigades' association started the volunteer-run fund in 1913, and it had been quietly helping volunteers in need for nearly a century, funded by Brigade subscriptions and an investment of £200 from the urban fire brigades' association and the CFA's predecessor, the Country Fire Brigades Board. Then in 2008, the newly formed VFBV expanded the Fund to offer coverage to both urban and rural Brigades, after securing a capital grant from the State Government," says President Nev.

Since being offered to all brigades in 2008, with careful management, the Fund has been able to provide grants worth \$1,026,033 to assist 319 volunteers in need.

VFBV Welfare Fund grants are financed by brigade subscriptions and the interest earned on the Fund's invested capital, which provides the income necessary to pay grants and at the same time maintain the Fund's asset capital base to ensure it can provide support to CFA volunteers in need for generations to come.

VFBV funds all operating and administrative costs of the Fund - so every dollar earned by the Fund's investments and subscriptions goes to assisting volunteers in need.

Typical cases for the VFBV Welfare Fund involve volunteers who are facing significant financial difficulty because of prolonged illness or a sudden death in the family.

They may be travelling to Melbourne several times a week for cancer treatment, dealing with unexpected funeral costs or needing short term assistance while awaiting the start of Government entitlements or new employment.

"In many cases, the Fund is able to help with the family's day to day bills in a way that takes off some of the pressure and allows the volunteer to continue with their normal life, often including their volunteering," said President Nev.

Since 2008, an average individual grant from the Fund has been just under \$3500, enough to pay utilities bills, buy groceries, cover costs for travel to hospital or ensure a young student stays in school.

The VFBV Welfare Fund is run as a government-approved charity by a VFBV Committee of Management under Australian Taxation Office rules, with its books independently audited every year.

Individual volunteer applications are considered by the Brigade before an application is made to the VFBV Committee of Management, and over the past five years the VFBV Welfare Fund Committee of Management has approved 92.5% of applications for support. VFBV has also negotiated discounts on some of the volunteers' bills, worked with their Brigades to monitor the situation in case the family needs additional assistance, and referred volunteers to sources of financial planning.

To offer a donation or enquire about subscribing to the VFBV Volunteer Welfare Fund, call (03) 9886 1141.

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