



VOLUNTEER FIRE BRIGADES VICTORIA

Address: 9/24 Lakeside Drive, Burwood East, 3151
 Email: vfbv@vfbv.com.au
 Telephone: 9886 1141
 Chief Executive Officer: Adam Barnett

Post: PO Box 453, Mt Waverley, 3149
 Website: www.vfbv.com.au
 Fax: 9886 1618
 State President: Samantha Collins



Success of State Champs

Over the last two weekends in March, the 2023 State Championships were held in Mooroopna for the third year in a row.

The first weekend of competition saw the Urban Junior State Championship take place, where Melton A won the Grand Aggregate for the third consecutive year. Melton A also took out the Under 17 Aggregate and Euroa A won the Under 14 Aggregate.

The following weekend, the Rural Senior Championship took place on Saturday, with Hurstbridge A winning the Division 1 Aggregate, Sedgwick A won the Division 2 Aggregate and Dunolly A the Division 3 Aggregate. Napoleons-Enfield was a runaway winner in the Rural Junior Championship on Sunday, winning the 11 – 13 years, 11 – 15 years and the Grand Aggregate winning an impressive eight out of ten events held on the day.

Melton A followed up their Urban Junior win with success at the Urban Senior Championship, winning the Grand Aggregate. Osborne Park B was successful in the B Section Aggregate and Euroa won the Female Aggregate for the second year in a row. Full results of the 2023 State Championships can be found on pages 10 to 12 of this edition of 'Fire Wise'.

In total over both weekends almost 900 competitors took part with 157 teams entering including teams from Harvey, Kellerberrin and Brunswick Junction brigades from Western Australia that travelled a long way to compete.

The State Championships would not be possible without the support of more than 200 judges and officials who volunteered their time over the two weekends. VFBV also passes on our appreciation to the

"If I had more time, I would have written a shorter letter" is one of my favourite quotes for obvious reasons, attributed to many but believed to be originally put by French mathematician, physicist and philosopher Blaise Pascal in the 1600's. And while I could probably start every month's column with these words, the past month has been a particularly busy one.

The results of last week's successful State Championships held over two successive weekends is not only detailed elsewhere on this page, but on pages 10-12 in this edition of 'Fire Wise'. A huge thank-you to all members, judges, officials and staff who contributed to a most successful event, and well done to all competing brigades and the almost 900 competitors who thrilled us with their incredible firefighting skills and professionalism.

competitors, coaches, supporters and families of the competitors who keep the competitions going, and all the CFA staff and dignitaries that contributed to the championships success. A special thank you should also be passed onto the CFA State Championships Committee and local host committee for the hard work and efforts in preparing the venue for the Championships particularly following flooding that affected much of Victoria in late 2022.

We also pass on our appreciation to the Greater Shepparton City Council for their continued support to the Championships, with this year marking the 11th time our Championships have been held in either Shepparton or Mooroopna since 1975.

VFBV's competition committees will be meeting in the coming months to review this year's Championships, if any brigades, competitors or spectators have any feedback they would like considered by either committee it can be emailed to championships@vfbv.com.au

CFA Alcohol and other Drugs policy

Feedback is being sought on a new draft policy covering Alcohol and other drugs, including prescription medication.

The draft policy covers arrangements for the appointment of a 'responsible officer', when alcohol can be consumed and a ban on brigades from applying for a new liquor license, with existing licenses able to be kept.

All members are encouraged to read and provide feedback ASAP. Feedback is due by Monday 8th May 2023.

Please visit the VFBV website for more information and a copy of the draft policy.

VFBV BOARD POSITIONS

Vacancies on VFBV Board will arise when the terms of four VFBV Board members expire on 1 October 2023. Of the four members whose terms are expiring, two are eligible for re-appointment.

VFBV invites applications from any CFA volunteer who is motivated by the prospect of making a difference and believes they have the skills to contribute to the VFBV Board.

The role of a board member involves contributing to VFBV direction, policy determination and monitoring the performance and governance of the Association. This includes actively contributing to policy discussion, consulting with CFA volunteers and contributing to the identification and management of strategic issues.

VFBV is seeking applications from gender and culturally diverse candidates in addition to a diverse range of skills and experience including applications from diverse brigade types and classifications.

Members should familiarise themselves with the VFBV Board member role statement and key selection criteria available from the VFBV website or via the office at (03) 9886 1141.

Applications close on Monday 28 August 2023.

BE ALERT – NOT ALARMED

by Adam Barnett, VFBV Chief Executive Officer

I'll start this month with the release of the Fire Services Implementation Monitor's annual report, tabled in Parliament on the 23rd March 2023, where the independent monitor, the Hon. Niall Blair considered and reported on the progress of implementation of the Government's fire services reforms.

At a high level, the report recognises the good progress that has been made on implementation actions. Importantly he acknowledges that many of those positives have largely been made possible not by any formalised arrangements or plans, but rather the goodwill and personal endeavour of volunteers and staff who Mr Blair rightly describe as wanting the best outcomes for Victoria's fire services and the Victorian community.

The report outlines slow progress and why actions are behind schedule, and highlights some of the challenges caused by the secondment arrangements, less than optimal volunteer utilisation, the sense of loss for those who have faced changes brought about by reform and how it was done. Of note are the warnings about the dangers around the future sustainability of the fire services, and in particular the risks of the chronic underfunding of capital funding for asset replacement and renewal given the number of assets (trucks and sheds) that are ageing beyond their useful life.

It was refreshing to see an independent statutory officer actually walk up to the issues and call them out by providing frank and fearless advice and putting our communities and the millions of people we protect at the heart of what fire service reform should be about – actually delivering better services and building strong and resilient communities.

The findings certainly vindicate the concerns raised by VFBV on behalf of volunteers during the reform debates around the predicted impacts on budgets, morale, culture, volunteer numbers and resultant declines in surge capacity.

At this juncture I am reminded of a Winston Churchill quote "A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty."

And that best describes our approach to pursuing reform outcomes in a constructive way, seeking to minimise the harm while searching for the opportunities available. Like Mr Blair, I'm not interested in spin or empty promises, and continue to advocate and pursue outcomes that actually benefit our communities. VFBV remains focused on looking forward, not backward, and with the tightening fiscal environment that is facing Victoria, the need to ensure every dollar that goes into fire services actually results in a community safety outcome is critical.

I was very pleased to note Mr Blair's recognition of the constructive approach to engagement and collaboration that VFBV has taken on behalf of volunteers, and I

thank all of those who have contributed to our feedback loops and been involved in discussions thus far.

I commend the independent monitor and his team for their diligence and honesty and believe it speaks volumes about the importance of integrity by those charged with responsibility in the public safety space in which we operate.

FIRE DISTRICT REVIEW PANEL

This will be a difficult pivot, but the Government's Fire District Review panel published its determination of "change in fire risk" in the Victorian Government Gazette on 30 March 2023. To accompany the determination, the panel published a 'supporting report' on the same day.

The panel's report claims to use a risk-based assessment of changes in fire risk in order to support its determination. Tellingly, despite a "state-wide analysis", the panel has chosen to only identify 13 station response areas all in the country area of Victoria and covered by CFA.

It would be fair to say that I am somewhat disappointed by how the panel has chosen to go about its work, which has resulted in a high level of anxiety and concern for those brigades affected. Since the publishing of the panel's determination, volunteers have expressed to us the detrimental impact these arrangements have had on morale.

To be clear, there is nothing unusual about fire services conducting analysis to track changes to fire risk to help inform and plan how service delivery may need to be modified to treat changes in risk. In fact, CFA and all predecessor fire agencies have done this for centuries. As risk changes, stations are upgraded or moved, appliances and equipment are added, and training and skill sets of responding crews is modified to meet the changing risk. All of course provided that government actually funds these necessary changes. The CFA model flexes up seamlessly to do precisely that, and does so in a highly efficient and cost effective way that ensures the Victorian taxpayer is not burdened with unnecessary costs better spent on hospitals and schools.

However, what is unusual about the arrangements the government has implemented is for this work to be done by people who are not experts in fire service planning, and who are engulfed in a cloud of political partisanship and bias that strikes fear and anxiety into all those impacted.

Volunteers expressed their anxiety about the potential for bias very early in discussions, and this featured prominently in our submission to the panel on their draft methodology in late 2021.

Sadly, the supporting report does little to alleviate volunteer concerns. While acknowledging that this is the panel's first report and should have been a baseline, it then uses thirteen-year-old data to

attempt to highlight what it thinks has been a change.

The first review should have been an opportunity to bed in their methodology and test the model for accuracy and set a baseline for "risk". Instead, not only have we not had the benefit of understanding the methodology or testing it for accuracy, but the panel has thrown in a completely new metric and data source not even contemplated in their draft or final methodology nor discussion papers. The use of motor vehicle accidents and casualties dwarfs the number of casualties from fire and explosions by a significant factor, yet appears to have been lumped in with vehicle fires.

Last time I checked, the Victorian road safety action plan identifies the Department of Transport, Victoria Police, the Transport Accident Commission and the departments of Justice and Health as being responsible for road safety.

The panel may have a reasonable explanation beyond a simple correlation coefficient to justify why this should impact a fire service boundary, but by not engaging and then lumping it into their determination, stakeholders and agencies alike have been blindsided and are now seeking to understand this significant change. The question remains - if they made this change to their "final" methodology without warning - what other changes have they made that are less obvious?

This takes me to the most obvious concern. The empowering legislation in the Fire Rescue Victoria Act is very explicit. Section 4J states that the object of a review is to conduct a risk-based assessment within (a) the Fire Rescue Victoria fire district; and (b) the Country Area of Victoria. Well, the report is very clear on what parts of the Country Area of Victoria they have looked at, yet somewhat vague about what parts of the FRV district has experienced a change in fire risk. To only analyse the FRV district in order to draw criticisms of CFA areas is neither fair, balanced, evidence based nor in the public interest.

"Change" in fire risk should be a neutral term, which can describe a risk that has risen, declined or stayed the same. An unbiased panel would look equally at areas where the risk has declined and where a boundary may contract, just as it would for proposing a boundary be expanded. No such analysis is apparent within the supporting report. Perhaps given their remit, the panel should have looked for what change in underlying risk occurred when the former CFA integrated stations transferred to Fire Rescue Victoria, and they put new logo's on the trucks so we could measure community outcome and benefit.

Putting to one side that none of the analysis actually defines community outcomes that a change in boundary is likely to achieve, nor how outcomes should be measured or monitored, my main advice to members worried about this panel's work is to remain alert



– but not alarmed.

While I'm disappointed, I am also not panicking. At the end of the day, the panels' role is to provide a recommendation to the Minister for Emergency Services. The CFA has been given 9 months (of a possible 12 months they could have been provided) to provide a formal response to the panel's determination. During this time, the panels review is suspended.

CFA has until January 30, 2024 to lodge its response, and the panel will then consider this response before providing a "recommendation" to the Minister by June 30, 2024. Upon receiving the advice, the Minister must then have regard to the capacity of each fire service, any implications on budget and resources and any other consequences before deciding to either make no changes, make some changes or ask the panel to conduct a further review.

During this time, we are seeking that CFA supports each of the brigades in trying to understand what the change in fire risk actually is, how it should be treated, and what additional resources they require from government in order to address the "changed risk." We will then look to government to ensure it supports each brigade. To not fund an agency to improve an outcome, and then criticise that agency for the gap is at the heart of our discontent over reforms, and we will therefore monitor governments actions closely.

Given both CFA and VFBV formally highlighted the obvious shortfalls and limitations of the panel's draft model with extensive submissions to the panels draft methodology, we will continue to seek greater transparency and less controversial engagement opportunities to help inform the panel's recommendations.

And while I am confident that CFA will be able to ably demonstrate how it is meeting or plans to meet the changed risk, I really feel for those brigades who now have to do what should be routine business as usual in a very public and politically charged environment. I ask all members and all brigades to please support these brigades as they travel this unnecessary difficult journey. As we have said previously, there are grave risks to putting fire service modelling into that type of environment, and VFBV will continue to advocate that 'surprises' and cherry picked data are incompatible with good public policy and public safety outcomes. All brigades and firefighters, both volunteer and paid must know and have confidence in the data being used to measure their performance, and measurements should be transparent, and outcome focussed to ensure the Victorian public is not misled or misinformed about their safety.