



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



2024 State championships

Final preparations are being made for the 2024 State Championships to be held at the Mooroopna Recreation Reserve later this month.

The first weekend of competition on 16 and 17 March, will see the 38 teams from across the state compete in the Urban Junior Championship. The next weekend will see even more action with 47 teams taking part in the Rural Senior Championship on Saturday 23 March and another 38 teams on Sunday 24th March will compete in the Rural Senior Championship. The Urban Senior Championship will also be contested this weekend with 40 teams taking part from all across Victoria.

The popular Torchlight Procession will also take place in Mooroopna on the evening of Saturday 23 March, with 46 brigades taking part. If your brigade is interested in marching in the Torchlight Procession, please contact championships@vfbv.com.au as soon as possible.

All of this competition would not be possible without the assistance of the more than 200 judges and officials who volunteer their time and expertise to ensure that each of the Championships is run at a high standard. Both the Urban and Rural competition committees are always on the lookout for additional judges and officials. If you are able to volunteer as a judge or official for any of the State Championships please contact the VFBV office via championships@vfbv.com.au or 9886 1141.

International Women's Day

Each year on March 8 International Women's Day celebrates the social, economic, cultural and political achievements of women as well as calling for action to accelerate women's equality.

The theme for International Women's Day this year is #InspireInclusion. This year's theme acknowledges that when we inspire others to understand and value women's inclusion, we forge a better world.

Throughout CFA and VFBV, there are many examples of the contribution women make to our communities and our fire services. The work and decisions being made today to embrace diversity and inclusion will ensure more women are supported and encouraged into the fire

services for future generations.

To each of the dedicated, highly skilled and much appreciated women in CFA and across all fire and emergency services, thank you for the contribution you make to making communities safer today and every day of the year.

Each of us can play a part in actively supporting and embracing equity within our own sphere of influence. This can include simple steps such as challenging stereotypes, calling out discrimination, drawing attention to bias and actively seeking out how to include others within our brigades, workplaces, communities, CFA and the wider emergency services across Victoria.

SOP feedback

A reminder that we are seeking feedback on various Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) that our out for consultation. The Driving SOPs will close for feedback shortly. An additional thirteen SOPs have been modified and are now available for review. These are SOP 3.01 Management of Junior Members; 5.05 Use of CFA Equipment; 7.01 Local Procedure Development; 7.05 Water Supplies for Firefighting; 7.07 Station Siren Use; 8.01 Incident Controller and CFA Agency Commander; 8.04 Transfer of Control; 9.13 Keeping Logs and Documents; 9.16 Media Management; and 9.18 Use of Personal Mobile Devices During Incidents.

Thank you

Thank-you to all members who completed this year's VFBV Volunteer Welfare and Efficiency Survey. You are helping us make CFA a better place to volunteer.

As soon as we have finished compiling and analysing your responses, we will publish the results.

Given the importance of SOPs in CFA's operational doctrine, VFBV encourages all senior volunteers to make themselves familiar with the proposed changes and provide feedback ASAP.

Please visit the VFBV website to access drafts and change logs to help guide your feedback.

PRESUMPTIVE LEG

QLD is the latest State to expand its firefighter presumptive legislation scheme to pick up the additional cancers added to the Commonwealth scheme in 2022. This now aligns QLD, TAS, WA, NT and ACT, leaving Victoria falling further behind.

VFBV continues pursuing further expansion of the scheme to pick up the remaining six cancers that were added to the Commonwealth's scheme being primary site lung, skin, penile, pancreatic and thyroid cancers and malignant mesothelioma.

VFBV is calling on the Victorian Government to align its scheme to ensure Victorian firefighters enjoy the same protections and support as their federal counterparts, and firefighters in the other State's.

We have published a national overview table on our website that allows members to compare each of the presumptive schemes in operation across the country. As you will see, Victoria is falling behind other jurisdictions. VFBV is seeking the support of all government, opposition and minor party MPs including independents to support the amendments introduced by the Greens, that would see Victoria's scheme expanded to the same 21 cancers that the Tasmanian government has introduced.

Enormity of bushfires

by Adam Barnett, VFBV Chief Executive Officer

It has been an incredibly busy month, both on and off the fireground, and I want to acknowledge the incredible work of all our people in battling the large fires from last month's spike days, including the two catastrophic fire danger ratings declared in Feb. Thank you also to those that supported communities through the storm events of the past month that left many thousands of Victorians without power, some for over a week.

Our Welfare Fund and the VFBV Volunteer Support and Recovery Trust have activated and are supporting members across the fire devastated areas, with six CFA members having lost their homes during last month's fires.

The skill and dedication of our volunteers has been remarked on by many over the past weeks and it is a timely reminder that the regularity of bushfires in Victoria has resulted in volunteer firefighting skills and experience that are simply unmatched anywhere else in the world. And time and time again I have had reports about how local knowledge has been used to quickly mop up spot fires and suppress them before they could take hold. An incredible achievement given the weather conditions.

And while there has been some minor criticism about the warnings issued in the lead up to the days in question, again we must remind the public that Fire Danger warnings are not an estimate of how likely a fire is going to occur on those days but rather the seriousness of the if and when and how a fire would behave should one be started and our capacity to bring it under control. To conflate the fact that luckily very few out of control fires actually started on those days is a mistake we must not let take hold. Just ask any bushfire survivor about the importance of early community warnings and you will not be left with any doubt as to their importance.

And while I know many hundreds of volunteers that were prepositioned on these days may feel they did not have much to do, the hundreds that were in situ and could pounce on fire starts from strategic locations with an overwhelming weight of attack when fire did occur is what stopped the various fires from developing any further. So be proud of your sacrifice waiting in hot fire trucks or humid staging areas – it was not for nought even if it felt that way.

For those that did see action - impact assessments demonstrated over and over the incredibly skilled work done by CFA members to protect lives and property. And while there were some losses, considering the areas affected it wasn't just plain luck that there were not more. It was pure skill and incredibly hard work, with surveys of the fire damaged areas showing very prominent fire perimeters around saved properties and clearly visible tyre marks left by CFA tankers as they circled homes and extinguished spot fires around townships

and residential streets.

If we want to talk about luck, let's talk about the chance of a creaking 34 year old fire truck, 14 years past its use by date having zero mechanical problems on the day when the mercury hits 40 and we need it the most. Let's talk about the firefighters sitting on the back in the open air on those hot smouldering days. Those odds are fast evaporating, and the Government is playing a game of Russian roulette each and every year that our trucks get older and older with no replacements in sight. And just to be clear, when you hear a recycled announcement from two years ago promising 40 new trucks, understand it is exactly that – a recycled announcement. With more than 2,300 trucks in the fleet, announcements of 40 new trucks will take another 58 years to replace the fleet.

Returning to February's fires – and while the workforce was overwhelmingly volunteer – I wish to acknowledge the contribution of our partner agencies, especially our friends at Forest Fire Management Victoria who stood shoulder to shoulder with us on the fireground. Thank-you also to all other agency personnel who assisted.

I also want to acknowledge the thousands of volunteers who have put themselves on call or stayed behind or worked from home to ensure local coverage remained. Thank you also to those non-operational personnel who have worked diligently in the background to get everything ready and provided critical support to our frontline operations. You don't appear on a fire report or get counted in the government's figures – but the work you do is essential.

These spike days are a reminder that as one of the most fire prone places on the planet, we don't need to have a bad fire season to have bad fires. A single day with just the right (or wrong) weather conditions can present a very real risk of catastrophic fires.

A lesson the current government would be well advised to remember as they contemplate de-funding our CFA. With a \$3 million cut already applied to CFA's budget this year, the prospect of additional budget cuts in the upcoming budget cycle looms large. As I reported back in January, a secret razor gang from Department Premier and Cabinet, Treasury and Justice have formed an "Emergency Services Organisation Finance Board" whose job it is to recommend further cuts.

To contemplate additional cuts to CFA after the spectacle of fire services reform seems very ill advised and very brave considering how much Victorians rely on CFA to deal with the increasing frequency of natural disasters.

And while I hope with all my might that Victorians won't have to pay the ultimate price of these foolish decisions with their lives, history very clearly demonstrates a

direct link between government investment and the outcomes of catastrophic fire events. If the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission wasn't plain enough, I'm not sure what more warning can be provided on the importance of preserving Victoria's volunteer workforce and service.

I noted in recent days that senior counsel assisting and former Supreme Court Judge - Rear Admiral the Honourable Jack Rush AO RFD KC RAN commenting on the lack of action taken since the 2009 Bushfires Royal Commission on moving overhead electrical cables underground in fire prone areas. The sound of exasperation in his voice was clear as he reflected on the absurdity that just 15 years after the tragedy of Black Saturday that we could so easily forget the effects and enormity of bushfires in Victoria.

He concluded that as a government and as a society for not forcing our government to act, we are remiss and doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past. One wonders how Victorians will react following the next Black Saturday when they discover that funding to CFA and a reduction in the number of support staff and services will be judged. Harshly I hope.

Which leads me to address the absurd statement run out by the government's media team dismissing concerns around the reduction of volunteers over recent years. I kid you not, but the statement "CFA has never drawn on its full reserves of volunteers" is not only the most stupid non-fact ever uttered, but also one of the most disrespectful statements to our brave and selfless volunteer firefighters I have ever heard. And while this statement was first used during fire services reform, it has been on high rotation recently when officials are squirming to respond to concerns about falling volunteer numbers.

When I talk about the importance of respecting volunteers, use this as a prime example of what you should not do.

Statements such as this ignores the very apex principle of volunteer services that you don't treat your volunteer workforce like some disposable cache of on-call employees.

Are they suggesting fathers and mothers are to simply leave the kids at home while both jump on the fire truck? Are they suggesting volunteers, who are also frontline workers across health, transport and other essential industries in their everyday lives, should abandon their posts to attend a fire? Should a volunteer who is battling a cost of living crisis losing their job and the roof over their head by not considering their employers situation before responding to an incident? Should they never go on holiday, be unwell or take a leave of absence to look after a sick family member? This is the practical effect of "drawing down" on CFA's full reserves. Shame on them for normalising such a deceitful



and immoral argument. Volunteering should never be exploitative, and asking less people to do more work and make more sacrifice than what they can already sustain is neither fair nor ethical. Yet this is exactly what these statements imply and why they are so offensive.

Volunteer services are built on the principle that you must amass a large number of volunteers to provide coverage, acknowledging not all will be available at the exact same time, and each are balancing their own needs. To run the system into the ground that then guilts what volunteers are left into sacrificing more than they can afford and comes at a great cost to them, their families and their employers is not acceptable.

For example, did SES "draw down" its full complement during last year's floods? Using the government's math - they did not. So why then did we need almost 12,000 CFA deployments to help them out?

In fact, the principle is not only well established for volunteers, but paid firefighting services operates on the principle of a 1:5 ratio that requires it to employ five firefighters for every one firefighter it wants to be on duty. This ratio factors in sickness, sleep, leave and other eventualities. To not consider a similar ratio for its volunteer workforce is outrageous.

The fact that the government spokesperson uttered these statements with a straight face to brush away concerns with volunteer numbers while in the next breath announcing that Victoria had requested 100 NSW RFS volunteers to come down to Victoria to assist with the fire-fight should demonstrate the utter absurdity of the comments.

In fact, this notion of wanting less volunteers is actually government policy – documented in last year's DJCS annual report that actually reduced Victoria's target for emergency management volunteers downwards by another 1,500. Yes - you read that right, they actually reduced their aspirational target to aim for less.

I have yet to see a climate model that predicts fire events will become less frequent and less damaging, so I urge the department to share the data that is providing this unhinged peace of mind so we can all share in its reassurance that we don't have anything to worry about.

Does anyone actually believe that attracting more people to CFA and other volunteer emergency services will be served by cutting funding so that volunteers have to keep battling just to get decent equipment, clothing, fire stations, trucks and support? To borrow a phrase - tell 'em they're dreamin'.