



# VOLUNTEER FIRE BRIGADES VICTORIA

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## JOINT COMMITTEE EOI

We are now accepting expressions of interest from volunteers to nominate to the CFA/VFBV Joint Committees for the 2025 calendar year.

If you feel you can contribute and have the time, are passionate about one of the eight streams and want to be an integral part of our Joint Committee process – then please visit our website or talk to your local VFBV State Councillor or VFBV Support Officer for a nomination form.

Nominations are due 25 November 2024.

We are seeking volunteers from broad and diverse backgrounds to participate in our consultative structures. Young members, women and members of culturally diverse backgrounds are highly encouraged to nominate. We also want to attract volunteers from as broad a range of brigade types and risk profiles as possible. If you would like to learn more about what the role entails and how to get involved, please contact your local VFBV Support Officer, State Councillor or Executive Officer Mark Dryden.

## SOP feedback

CFA has recently released another 17 revised SOPs for volunteer feedback and consultation. At time of press, we are currently undertaking a log of changes and will prepare SOP feedback surveys once we have completed our analysis of changes. These will be uploaded to the VFBV website shortly.

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.

## VFBV VOL SURVEY

This year's annual VFBV Vol Survey will shortly be opening.

Visit <https://tinyurl.com/vfbv-survey> to pre-register and ensure you are notified as soon as it opens.

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

## Big fills deployed

The VFBV Volunteer Support and Recovery Trust has finally received all four of the single axle Big Fill trailer pumps that it ordered as part of the final phase of recovery works from the Black Summer bushfires. Each of the Big Fill's has been donated to groups in the east and north east of the state most heavily impacted by the Black Summer fires. The four groups are; Omeo, Orbost, Mitchell/Tambo and Corryong Groups.

The Big Fills are a single axle trailer mounted pump with a water cooled diesel engine with a capacity of up to 2000 litres per minute at 700kPa. Big fills are a key part of brigades and groups ability to fill trucks quickly from a static water source. They come equipped with a pneumatic light mast with 4 LED lights for night use as well as a 'green' water point strobe light for easy identification. The ability for VFBV to fund these critical pieces of equipment came about from some amazing support from members of the public and our good friends from the Barlow Impact Group.

All four Big Fills have now been deployed and seen action.

In fact, during a handover presentation, VFBV Executive Officer Mark Dryden and VFBV D11 Vice President Michael Freshwater were at the Lindenow Fire Station where the donated Mitchell and Tambo group Big Fill is being kept, when they noticed thick black smoke billowing from the packing shed nearby.

The Big Fill was hooked up and responded alongside Lindenow Tanker and several other brigades from the District including Bairnsdale and Mt Taylor. After the incident Mr Freshwater confirmed that the Big Fill had proven its worth, and would be a valuable piece of equipment as we move into another busy fire season. VFBV hopes that the trailers will be a valuable resource for firefighters in the seasons ahead.



Photo: VFBV Board Member Howard Smith handing over the Big Fill to Group Officer Corryong Group, Kevin Whitehead.

CFA has recently confirmed with VFBV the dates of the 2025 State Championships.

The Championships will again be held in Moorooopna on consecutive weekends in

This will be followed by the Rural Senior and Junior Championships and the Urban Senior Championship

## FEEDBACK LOOP

by Adam Barnett, VFBV Chief Executive Officer

Consistency and remaining on message are two of the most crucial elements of successful advocacy. Given our principles and expectations of CFA are laid out for all to read in the Volunteer Charter, I am sometimes somewhat bemused at people who are surprised by volunteer reaction to some policy proposals. Anyone bothering to do a small amount of research should be able to roughly estimate whether something is likely to be warmly received, or alternatively detested and rejected.

Therefore, one of the things that makes me particularly cranky is when I hear people accusing volunteers of not embracing change. Rubbish.

CFA volunteers are not against change. They are against pointless change and change for changes sake, or change that has not been thought out, is not resourced or funded, or is simply unachievable.

The Charter provides six fairly simple principles: (1) Is it fair? (2) Is it just? (3) Is it reasonable? (4) Does it discriminate? (5) Is it practicable and sustainable? And finally, (6) Is it in the best interests of the community?

And when evaluating change against these principles, volunteers are not going to fall for corporate or political spin that asks them to suspend all reality, and they will not blindly just go along with something because someone thinks it's trendy. And honestly, who can blame them?

Volunteer firefighters have protected their communities from fire and other disasters since time immemorial, and most reviews into disasters rarely find issues with the local response or brigade, but rather the systems, processes or interventions forced upon them by bureaucrats and administrators.

So, know - that when you propose a changed policy or arrangement, volunteers will evaluate it with full candour and unapologetic pragmatism. If you are only interested in policy that works, is sustainable and makes a positive difference – then this should not alarm you.

As volunteer firefighters, we work in a complex and dangerous sector and are dealing with risks that constantly change and require dynamic risk assessments. Our assessment of corporate policy is not going to be any different.

Therefore, it should surprise no one that simply proposing changes based on the "vibe", and without any evidence base, without sharing any research or analysis about the problem trying to be solved, how the solution will supposedly fix it or the simple matter

of bringing people along on the journey – the only people that should be surprised by volunteer resistance are the people probably most to blame for their idea flopping in the first place. Themselves.

What if the reason volunteers rejected the idea was simply because it was a dumb idea or simply wouldn't work. Sounds like a pretty reasonable reason to me.

Volunteers are actually champions of change – changes that makes things simpler, quicker, more efficient and achieve better outcomes. Why then is it always so hard to get agencies to adopt these changes when we ask? So if you ask me who is more resistant to change – the agency or its volunteers, I know which one I'd pick.

In fact – brigades adapt faster to the changing risk profile of their communities than anyone else. In fact – the fire services as a whole often take years to catch-up. Almost every single retrofit or statewide program has followed one or more brigades proving a concept or demonstrating a need that finally leads to a statewide program or funding.

The fact that volunteers did their own tests, procured and fundraised for their own equipment to make something work – often gets overlooked – but make no mistake – these are the ingenious origin stories to which most of the big advances in technology or fire service processes have sprung.

Therefore, I would like to sincerely thank members for their continued discipline in responding to our feedback requests. I read almost every single piece of feedback given, so I come from a unique vantage point to say I know and appreciate that many of you are sick and tired of the same old proposals being regurgitated with each change of personnel, or changes being proposed with no discernible improvement or outcome in mind.

Yet – you continue to be involved – and this is the most valuable lesson of all. Volunteering isn't a job that you just tire of one day. That's not to say you don't get tired. But volunteering is a vocation and a passion. It comes out loud and clear from your feedback.

Your desire for the "system" to work for the benefit of your brigade and your community. Your wish that arrangements will actually encourage, support and strengthen the ability of volunteers to deliver CFA services. And your hope that your feedback will actually make a difference and may actually improve things.

And it is on this final point, I would like to digress.

Your feedback does make a difference. I read enough of your feedback to know many of you often don't think it does but trust me when I say it makes a much bigger difference than you think. Even when the immediate results don't appear that way – the sentiment and knowledge

contained in your feedback outlasts single requests. So, even when CFA does not respond to the feedback or does not modify their position – your feedback is used to build VFBV's organisational memory and is what heavily influences formal VFBV positions, and our continued advocacy for further change.

We don't give up, and you can lose the battle without losing the war.

In a good news story, and to illustrate my point - I wanted to share with you the progress made on CFA's revised Brigade Finance Policy which CFA has recently finalised.

Members would recall that CFA first released its initial drafts in June of last year. Back then, CFA released a brigade finance policy "suite" that consisted of six interrelated policies, totalling more than 21 individual pages of associated requirements. It would be fair to say that the 'suite' fell very flat on brigades, many of whom responded most unfavourably to the proposed arrangements, including the tone and needless complexity proposed. Very prominent in volunteer feedback was the principle that volunteers joined CFA to support an emergency service, they did not join to donate countless hours as unpaid public servants to the Victorian Government's Treasury department.

After undertaking broad consultation with volunteers, VFBV provided formal feedback to CFA in October last year. And while I make no apologies, our feedback was rather forthright and candid and made the point that there was significant volunteer backlash to CFA's proposals. But rather than just reject and criticise the policy, VFBV provided more than 10 pages of feedback and suggestions of how the arrangements could be adapted and improved to respond to volunteer concerns.

To be honest – it would have been much easier just to provide the criticism.

But what kind of partner would we be if we didn't try to use our deep organisational knowledge to try and improve the outcome and help CFA improve its proposals and respond to the criticism? This is where your feedback was critical. Without people taking the time to explain why they did not support something – we would not have been able to provide the level of detail and analysis to help explain to CFA the reason behind the overwhelming rejection.

To CFA's credit, the incoming CFA Chief Financial Officer (Sam Costanzo) who inherited the draft policy when he started in November last year, took all the feedback very constructively. In fact, both he and Robyn Harris as his direct line manager, committed to VFBV that they would diligently go through all the feedback and would methodically work through each of the areas of concern, checking back at regular intervals. And over the pro-



ceeding 10 months – that is exactly what they did – not just with VFBV, but also their internal teams so they could better understand why specific policy outcomes were being sought in the first place.

Which leads us to the new policy. A seven-page policy that replaces the six policies and 21 pages previously proposed. Key to the changes are:

- A tiered requirement for brigade financial plans, based on risk and providing simplified processes for brigades based on the level of their funds.

- Enhanced authorisations for brigade/group decision making and empowerment

- Easier to understand record keeping and reporting requirements

- Streamlined fundraising approval processes, and more practical processes for assessing donations and offers of sponsorship.

- Much clearer guidance on operating bank accounts and the use of debit cards

- A commitment by CFA to supporting Secretaries and Treasurers, minimise compliance burdens and provide tailored advice to volunteers

Significantly, CFA reversed and dropped its plans to charge volunteers for annual recognition events, prevent brigades from donating to natural disaster recovery charities, and stopping brigades from being able to lease office equipment like photocopiers and the like.

And while one could argue these were stupid proposals to begin with, I have been impressed with the good will, patience and scale in which CFA was prepared to completely re-write and reconsider its policy in order to respond to volunteer concerns.

A great result, and a good example of us working constructively together to work through the issues and improve the policy.

But this approach requires at least two things. A willingness by both sides to commit to genuine dialog that includes an open mind to reconsider previous positions, and the generous support of volunteers to entrust VFBV with their feedback and the reasons they think something will or will not work that supports our continued advocacy for a result that helps us argue for the changes required.

So, to those that contributed to the feedback on this and other items of late – thank-you. Don't lose hope, and I hope this gives you confidence that your feedback can in fact make a difference – more often than not – a really big difference.