



VOLUNTEER FIRE BRIGADES VICTORIA

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I wish to start this month by reiterating my words of thanks that was published on the 14 January, and is reproduced on page 3 of this month's *Fire Wise*. On behalf of the whole VFBV family we continue to acknowledge the absolutely incredible work that has been done, and continues to be done, by CFA members in fire affected communities across the state.

Complementary, yet not identical efforts

by Adam Barnett, VFBV Chief Executive Officer

As at writing, heatwave conditions continue across large parts of the State and are expected to last until the first few days of February. All up, this has been the longest heatwave event in Victoria since 2009.

Highlighting the high and sustained workload our crews

are still shouldering, as at January 30 there are currently seven major fires across the state, with more than 435,000ha of land burned.

While numbers are still being compiled, more than 12,000 volunteers have been deployed, not counting the thousands who have remained in area for local coverage, or who have put themselves on standby. These numbers demonstrate CFA's incredible volunteer surge capacity and why it is so important to protect it from further decline.

I also continue to be humbled by the modesty of our members who mourn every loss yet refuse to give up. That inextinguishable community spirit shines even brighter, as members battle what at times are unstoppable beasts of mother nature.

And while the losses are widely reported, I remain frustrated that more is not done across the sector to measure and estimate the incredible saves. With real time mapping and predictive modelling underpinning the majority of our community warning systems, I believe it to be a significant missed opportunity to not recognise and value the incredible combined efforts of our firefighters and other agency personnel. If we can plot polygons on maps based on rate of spread, weather and fuel loads, surely it is not beyond our capability to provide some rough estimates of what was achieved by the incredible work done by our crews working to pull these fires up.

It's important to similarly acknowledge the contribution of members who provide day to day coverage and township protection of their local areas. These sacrifices allow other crews and members from each brigade to be dispatched far and wide to support incidents afar. Similarly, those who contribute through support roles are all equally important and vital to our mission of saving life and property.

A quick shout out to our wonderful DMOs who have been working tirelessly keeping the fleet operational - no small feat in its current state. The relationships they have established with volunteers through their regular maintenance schedules during the year really pays off during campaign fires, as members have trust in the people they know and have a pre-existing relationship with.

A huge thank-you also to all our delegates and officials who have been working to support affected brigades to access additional support resources. Sadly, as is often the case, the same disasters that affect our communities also affects our own members. Tragically, this season has seen the highest level of CFA volunteers who have lost their own homes from campaign fires since Black Saturday, with more than 20 of our own members' homes lost.

Highlighting the profound commitment of volunteers to their communities, the majority of these members were actually on fire trucks or deployed to the fireground saving other people's prop-

erty when their own homes were lost.

As a result, the VFBV Welfare Fund and VFBV Volunteer Support and Recovery Trust have been working tirelessly to support members in hardship. Just in January alone, the Trusts have provided more than \$150,000 in grants to members affected, with priority being to those who have lost their primary places of residence.

This has put significant workload onto the Trustees of each Trust, and I want to pass on my heartfelt appreciation to our volunteers who take on these roles, and who's work is often unseen in the background.

I also want to pass on my appreciation and absolute awe of the brigade Captains, officers and members with whom we have been working with to support these members. Each brigade we have worked with has been under immense pressure with simultaneous demands in continuing to fight active fires within their communities, as well as having to care for those members personally impacted. In each case, far from simply looking after their own, each brigade has been leaning heavily into supporting community wide recovery works, and I cannot articulate the immense pride I feel seeing our very capable brigades and volunteers lead their communities through what are very difficult days. From catering for community members who have lost everything, to supporting relief centres, providing drinking water, generators, fuel and livestock feed - these efforts are all on top of their active firefighting.

It is these intrinsic community connections and networks that some miss when trying to figure out why CFA brigades have such a high level of trust and connection within their local communities. Our fire brigades are far more than simply a building or shed to store fire trucks. They are the beating heart and soul of the very communities in which they are located. While often underestimated, they are the glue that builds community resilience.

The demand on our Trusts does not come without consequence. Our Volunteer Support and Recovery Trust in particular, is now almost completely depleted. This fund relies on donations to do its vital work and is only activated during large scale emergencies. As such it holds very little reserves and therefore relies on donations following the event. The now spent reserves were only made possible due to the generous corporate donation from the Barlow Impact Group following the 2019/20 bushfires.

And while asking for donations it is not an activity we relish, it is a necessary requirement to support the crucial work we do in supporting CFA volunteers during these kind of events. The article on page 3 of this edition's *Fire Wise* publication outlines some of the previous work of our Trusts.

Brigades, Groups and members of the public may donate via www.givenow.com.au/volunteersupport or for larger

donations and to avoid processing fees being deducted from your donation, direct deposit details are available at www.supportcfavolunteers.com.au

I also draw members attention to our Bushfire Recovery Resources Fact Sheet that was published in early January and has been updated as information changes.

In our experience, people experiencing hardship are often overwhelmed and do not have time to search, find and navigate the various assistance that is available. Our Fact Sheets try to put all relevant resources into a single document that can either be viewed electronically - or handed to someone who can then assess what they need most. We can post a printed copy by contacting vfbv@vfbv.com.au or the office on (03) 9886 1141.

Since our January edition, there has been a significant number of developments across our multi-year campaign for fairer CFA funding and resourcing. The outpouring of community support, awareness and concern for CFA's lack of fair funding was due in large part from deliberate community awareness we have been building over the last few years. We have provided the detailed and trust worthy analysis highlighting issues with CFA's budget, the age of the fleet, and lack of support for CFA more generally including basic volunteer amenity.

Unsurprisingly, following recent fires there was also a significant convergence of political activity and attention as Government tried to deflect much deserved criticism from its decade's long underinvestment in CFA and ideological attacks.

Be assured that VFBV is undertaking high levels of advocacy within government, CFA and across our sector. These discussions are robust and ongoing as one would expect following recent developments.

As a peak body, our commitment is to always honour and respect the hard-earned volunteer reputation, ensuring we represent volunteers with dignity, strength and professionalism. Our authenticity and restraint build trust and respect. Effective advocacy is not achieved by simply shouting the loudest. Mother Teresa is often quoted as saying "I can do things you cannot, you can do things I cannot; together we can do great things."

Ultimately our goal is to move the needle and achieve long-term bi-partisan support for fairer funding of CFA, a sustainable and safe firefighting fleet, and greater support and respect for CFA volunteers and the vital role volunteer brigades play now and for the future.

This requires deliberate effort, strategic intent and building credibility and trust with those we interact. A year ago, to the day, I wrote about the short sightedness of current government policies and the obvious learnings from disasters such as the RSM Titanic. Two years prior to



that I wrote about the forgotten lessons from Ash Wednesday and the high price we pay in Victoria for those lessons. And just last month, prior to the current bushfires even starting, we covered the critical measures of under resourcing of CFA.

These arguments will not be won or lost within a single bushfire season. They never have before. Long term change requires hard work and sustained efforts.

We cannot deny the effects of politicisation of the fire services, and then simply resort to playing politics when it suits. I firmly believe the overall politicisation of the fire services has been the single worst thing to inflict our sector and the vital work of an emergency service.

VFBV efforts are therefore focussed not only on the emergency at hand, but working across the political divide to engage, educate and change the minds of decision makers without resorting to partisan politics, or exploiting community anguish. While alternate tactics may bring temporary relief, they will ultimately lead to a state of perpetual grievance, counter grievance and turmoil. None of which will work for the communities with which we protect.

And while I do not criticise the efforts of others, I assertively reject any suggestion that only identical approaches and tactics will prevail. We must each play to our strengths and see others as a complement to our own.

Our warnings have been clear, and our ability to influence stakeholders will ultimately rest on relationships built on trust and respect. We are not afraid to engage with frank and fearless advice, but personal attacks rarely win the argument. This doesn't mean going softer, or avoiding the hard discussions, but it does mean being strategic and using our influence with scalpel precision.

I appreciate we are navigating a very complex and emotional environment. I also appreciate the anguish that is fuelling people's emotions and acknowledge they are genuine grievances. We are focussed on the long journey, and we still have a way to go. We must not betray our principles for the illusion of short-term gain no matter how alluring. We continue to invite government to partner with volunteers using the principles and promises made under the Volunteer Charter and join us in building a safer and more resilient Victoria.

Stay safe and look after each other.

DONATE NOW

The VFBV Volunteer Support & Recovery Trust fund (formerly Black Saturday Recovery Trust Fund) was established in 2009 following the Black Saturday fires.

This fund is established to respond to significant natural disasters such as floods, storms and bushfires impacting on CFA volunteers, and is calling for donations to support CFA volunteers who have been directly impacted by the 2025/26 Bushfires.

Donate at: www.givenow.com.au/volunteersupport

2025/26 SURVEY NOW OPEN

The 2025-26 annual VFBV Volunteer Survey is open.

Visit the VFBV website www.vfbv.com.au/cfa to take part in the survey today. Paper copies of the survey are also available by calling the VFBV office on (03) 9886 1141.

STATE CHAMPIONSHIPS

A final reminder that entries and judge and official nominations for the 2026 State Championships will close on Sunday 15 February 2026.

For information on how to enter your team or nominate as a judge or official for any of the championships please visit tinyurl.com/2026-entry

This year's State Championships will be held in Stawell across two weekends. The Urban Junior Championship will be held on the weekend of 21 and 22 March. The following weekend (28 and 29

March) will see the Urban Senior and Rural Junior and Senior Championships take place.

The popular Torchlight Procession will also be held on Saturday 28 March in the Stawell CBD, participation in the Torchlight Procession is open to all brigades not just those competing in the State Championships.

If you would like further information on the Torchlight Procession please contact the VFBV office via championships@vfbv.com.au.

AUSTRALIA DAY HONOURS

VFBV congratulates the five CFA members who were awarded the prestigious Australian Fire Service Medal (AFSM) in this year's Australia Day honours list.

The five members who were recipients of the Australian Fire Service Medal are: Kelvin Bateman from Dunrobin-Nangeela fire brigade in District 4; Brendan Blake from Loddon Vale Fire Brigade in District 20; Emma Conway from District 9 Headquarters Brigade; Garth Johnson from Langwarrin Fire Brigade in District 8; and Gavin Parker Commander in District 27 and member of Neerim South Fire Brigade in District 9. Fire Rescue Victorian Commander Graham Kirk also received an AFSM.

Each of these members has been recognised for their innovation, leadership, leading brigades through major emergencies while also advocating for volunteers and leading innovation in CFA's fleet, training and equipment.

You can read more about these members on page 10 of this edition of *Fire Wise* or on the VFBV website.

Eligible Volunteers Rebate Scheme

A reminder that the eligible volunteers rebate scheme is now open for eligible volunteers and life members to apply for a rebate on an eligible property under the Emergency Services Tax.

VFBV continues to hear misinformation about eligibility. Some members have reported they are not eligible due to the current rate freeze that paused the primary producer tax rate to last year's levels. This pause does not affect the rebate scheme, and

members who own their primary place of residence or farm and are listed on the title, are encouraged to assess their eligibility for a rebate by logging into their CFA online account, to complete the CFA eligibility test.

To check the rules and eligibility requirements, you can visit: <https://www.vic.gov.au/evrs>

If you are eligible and own an eligible property, head to <https://www.members.cfa.vic.gov.au/> to start the process.