

26 March 2015

Ms Bronwyn Halfpenny, MLC
Chair, Inquiry into CFA Training College at Fiskville
Parliament of Victoria,
Environment and Natural Resources Committee,
Parliament House,
Spring Street,
Melbourne, VIC 3000

Dear Ms Halfpenny,

Inquiry into CFA Training College at Fiskville

Firefighting is an inherently dangerous and unpredictable activity. The need for firefighters to be trained, practised and ready for a range of real life scenarios is paramount. State of the art training facilities, capable of simulating live scenarios, hot fire training and specialist training are fundamental to good performance in times of emergency. Investment in firefighting training must be seen as an investment in saving lives and property not just another cost of doing business.

Easy, frequent and cost effective access to such training is critical for fire services, particularly organisations such as CFA. CFA's large geographically dispersed workforce and the volunteer based nature of that workforce means that training needs to be available as close as possible to the volunteers home location and where there is a need for multi day training, long duration experience simulation or learning, accommodation facilities become an intrinsic component of the training capability/infrastructure.

In the same way that firefighting is an inherently dangerous activity, the exposure to toxins released during combustion and sometimes the agents used to extinguish fires also pose a large risk to firefighters. The historic Fiskville experience demonstrates that these toxic exposures can be present in hot fire training scenarios in just the same way as random fire events. All firefighters must be protected from these exposures and supported if they suffer illness as a result of exposure.

Whatever underlying causes contributed to the exposure of the firefighters attending Fiskville in the past, one thing that must be resolved is the fair protection of any firefighters who may be suffering illness as a result of past practices.

It is not realistic to simply cease training or remove a critical component of CFA's training infrastructure (in this case Fiskville) from the training capability network. Firefighters need to be trained. VFBV supports the need for systematic analysis of any past or present practices to ensure avoidable or inappropriate exposure to firefighting safety is fixed. VFBV also supports and as requested when Fiskville safety concerns started to emerge, the need for expert, independent and transparent inquiry, reporting and resolution of safety concerns.

Decisions about future practices and future training facility design should be driven by such expert, independent and transparent advice on an objective, future thinking basis.

Just as part unsafe practices are not acceptable and therefore should be eliminated, the current and future decisions need to be based on assessment of the current and projected future situation and this assessment needs to be objective, transparent, independent and expert based.

There is much public attention and emotion now involved with the Fiskville facility. Regardless of how these factors weigh into ultimate decisions, several things are certain;

- If Fiskville is to continue to be utilised for hot fire or other training it needs to be safe.
- If Fiskville capability for use as a training or hot fire training facility is to be wound back or ceased then investment to replace this capability will be required as the rest of the fire services training network will not cope with the overall training load and firefighters who currently rely on Fiskville as their 'local' training facility must have easy and proximate access to state of the art training.
- There has already been significant investment in the Fiskville facilities; there may need to be further remediation works (and this could be high cost) to fix any remaining safety concerns; and new facilities to replace any wind back at Fiskville will require large funding investment. Just as firefighter safety cannot be compromised nor can provision of funding to ensure adequate training capability for the future.
- Swift action needs to be taken to support any individuals suffering illness as a result of exposure at Fiskville regardless of any decisions about past practice process, management or monitoring deficiencies.

The attached VFBV submission to the inquiry contains the VFBV collected views and concerns of CFA volunteers in relation to the matters being considered by the inquiry and potential flow on implications arising from the inquiry and, in particular their concerns regarding future training opportunities.

VFBV is available to provide further material to the inquiry if requested.

Yours Sincerely,



Andrew Ford
Chief Executive Officer

1. Summary.

The Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria (VFBV) submission to the Inquiry into the CFA Training College at Fiskville covers the key issues facing volunteers in the access to and safe use of training facilities.

This submission discusses;

- The role of training and the importance of realistic training exercises in preparing firefighters for the real emergency events they may face, to provide them with the best skills available to keep themselves, their team and the community safe.
- The health and safety issues surrounding both hot fire training and responding to emergencies, potential exposure to harmful chemicals at these events and the need for rigorous testing, appropriate legislation and support for volunteers.
- The challenges faced by CFA volunteers in accessing suitable training facilities with appropriate infrastructure to meet both the theoretical and practical training requirements, on a flexible basis to meet volunteer availability.
- The role of the Fiskville facility in operational training, the benefits delivered by a residential campus with on-site accommodation and the range of services provided by Fiskville outside of training.
- The need for ongoing transparency and independence in the inquiry and eventual decision making process.
- The factors for consideration in determining the best course of action for Fiskville in relation to remediation or closure.

This submission draws on the expertise and experience of many CFA volunteers and uses references from recent reviews and reports where appropriate.

2. Background.

There is an overarching principle that must be considered whenever dealing with issues concerning the training of CFA members; regardless of them being volunteers or paid career staff.

All CFA members train together and respond together. **A firefighter is a firefighter.** The risks confronted by all CFA members, whether paid or not, are essentially the same both in complexity and severity. This has been the case since before the inception of CFA and will continue into the future. The challenge of our current leaders is to ensure that CFA has the right facilities and to ensure all CFA members are adequately trained. Being able to provide ready access to the full range of appropriate training, particularly 'hot fire' practical training, recognises this principle.

The importance for CFA to provide a range of strategically located firefighter training facilities cannot be understated; especially when catering for the large pool of volunteer firefighters in Victoria. Every one of CFA's 1,216 brigades are exposed to a range of risks and all CFA firefighters need access to good training facilities that are convenient to where they live or work and are able to provide safe and modern firefighting training.

Participation in realistic hot fire scenarios on a regular basis is an essential component of ensuring that all CFA members, regardless of where they are located in Victoria are able to respond in the safest possible environment with the experience of the best possible training; based on training that is practical, realistic and contemporary. In the 'Report of inquiry into the effect of arrangements made by the Country Fire Authority on its volunteers' (the Jones Inquiry) His Honour David Jones AM states;

In an organisation like the CFA, training is critical. Firefighters, whether they be volunteer or paid have to be trained to acceptable standards, and need to be trained for a range of capabilities. Their skills need to be assessed and maintained. Their lives and the lives of others can depend on their skills and how well they have been trained. (p. 143).

Fiskville has been at the core of the development and maintenance of CFA's capacity to be able to meet the needs of all members. Fiskville has historically been the home of CFA's structural firefighting training – catering for state-wide training courses and the more complex courses not currently available at CFA's regional training grounds. A key aspect of the facilities developed at Fiskville has been the mix of theoretical (classroom) learning with the ability to put the theory into practice in the hot fire training area while being accommodated at the facility.

Any reduction in accessibility to the training facilities provided by Fiskville would have an adverse impact on the safety of CFA's firefighters and the safety of our community. CFA volunteers deserve the best possible facilities to ensure they can serve their communities and any closure of Fiskville will require careful consideration as to what is provided to replace the facility.

3. The safety of CFA members.

VFBV has always treated the safety of CFA members as a high priority. We have consistently argued for and supported initiatives directed at improving the safety of all CFA members both on and off the fireground, as did our predecessor organisations, the Victorian Urban Fire Brigade's Association and the Victorian Rural Fire Brigade's Association.

VFBV played an active and supportive role to Professor Joy's investigative team by helping to locate personnel that had attended or worked at Fiskville.

When VFBV was alerted to Fiskville safety concerns in early 2012, we raised a concern that safety of CFA members be given priority both in terms of past exposures and potential contemporary exposures. At that time, We requested independent, expert and transparent water quality assessment, and water quality management and treatment advice; full disclosure of test results; publication of this information to CFA members and further study to assess cancer/health implications for CFA members attending CFA training facilities.

While the best equipment and clothing can be provided to CFA members, it is the training they are provided – realistic and practical – that ultimately makes them safe on the fireground. Any scaling back of the use of Fiskville, without a firm plan of how to replace the facility, is of greatest concern to VFBV and CFA members in general. The question in mind is "how do we continue to train our people without it?"

The extensive training facilities at Fiskville, both theoretical and practical based, provide opportunities to develop the required knowledge and skills that lead to safer operations,

through exposure to realistic scenarios in carefully controlled situations under the watchful eyes of instructors and trainers.

The safety of all CFA members and the effectiveness of fire management at major fire emergencies can be enhanced by ensuring that members throughout the State learn and apply common operating procedures and techniques.

Exposure to hot fire training scenarios is a vital contributor to improved safety as it develops confidence in the capabilities of the items of equipment used and in their own abilities that is transferable to a range of emergency situations. In Professor Robert Joy's report "Understanding the Past to Inform the Future - Report of the Independent Fiskville Investigation" (the Joy Report), he states;

Safe and effective firefighting is dependent on the knowledge and skills of those who actually deliver the service. (p. 31).

CFA members across Victoria can attest to the benefits of undertaking training at Fiskville and many speak of the learnings which have helped keep them safe in times of uncertainty and danger. While firefighting is a dangerous and, at times, unpredictable endeavour, many of our people have been kept safe because of what they learnt at Fiskville – both in the classroom and on the fireground.

VFBV vigorously supports the need for the effective treatment of any potential source of harm or threat to the health of individuals who live, work or train at Fiskville.

The historical and current hazards discovered at the site have occurred alongside the exposures associated with all firefighting and are similar in their effect on firefighters, both volunteer and paid, in the form of health effects that may take years to surface and present the sick firefighter with the nearly impossible task showing evidence of exposures that might be 10 or 15 years ago and proving on the balance of probabilities which incidents or which toxic exposures caused their illness.

Governments overseas, the Australian Parliament and most other State Governments have already recognised the connection between certain cancers and the exposures involved in firefighting, and have introduced the presumptive legislation required to move towards fairer and simpler cancer compensation for firefighters. VFBV is continuing its campaign for appropriate presumptive legislation in Victoria, to cover career and volunteer firefighters equally.

In the same interests of the wellbeing of all members, VFBV has worked with CFA since questions were raised about the safety of training practices at Fiskville. We argued for greater monitoring and easier access to information for members, including the posting of regular water testing results on the CFA website for the information of all members. VFBV has also been advocating and supporting changes to new training foams to be used at all training grounds.

We seek an effective and robust system of support for all CFA members and their families who have been diagnosed with health issues; one that will also cater for those who may be diagnosed in the future. Our concerns extend beyond the exposures associated with Fiskville and include any potential health impacts on volunteers caused by their vital emergency response work.

4. The basis of training in CFA.

Our predecessor organisations recognised the need for a residential training facility that was the centre of excellence for CFA's theoretical and practical based training. They actively lobbied for the establishment of Fiskville and for it to be open to all CFA members. Fiskville has grown over decades to become the pivotal part of the training provided to CFA members and services a significant quantity of CFA training needs, as stated in the Joy Report;

For the period addressed by the Terms of Reference (1971–1999), CFA Annual Reports indicate approximately 87,000 CFA training attendances for both theoretical and practical training or other functions such as conferences (p.32).

Fiskville is viewed by CFA members as the foundation of training within CFA. It is the place where those who are the respected leaders and operational commanders have learnt and honed their skills. It is the keystone of the structure and systems developed over the past four decades that members trust and respect. **It is the place that trains the trainers.**

Volunteers earn their living in a broad range of occupations and must attend training at times to suit their mode of employment and their family commitments. This pre-supposes that fire brigade training must be available in a very flexible format and at times that might normally be considered "out of hours" for most people.

It is important to appreciate that much of the practical training at Fiskville is conducted by a pool of experienced volunteer personnel who have typically attended Fiskville to gain competency as Instructors or PAD Operators; those who train our people need depth of knowledge and a high degree of experience – something that Fiskville is best able to provide of all of CFA's facilities.

These trained instructors facilitate the weekend and evening training sessions that are necessary to suit the large number of volunteers that are the main providers of fire services to communities in the Country Area of Victoria, which includes a large proportion of the outer suburbs of Melbourne.

CFA would not be able to provide the breadth of training it does to its volunteers without well trained people. Fiskville represents one of the best training facilities in Australia and the loss of this facility has potential to reduce CFA's ability to qualify Instructors and PAD Operators.

The value that experienced CFA volunteers, who are qualified to deliver and assess training brings to the CFA training framework is significant and represents a significant cost-benefit to the economy of Victoria. The quantum of training delivered by volunteers to volunteers could never be afforded by CFA or Government if salary payment was required.

More importantly – the benefits of being trained by the people you will be responding with builds strong teams and brings local knowledge to the training environment. Whilst 'imported' subject matter experts may be used for specialist training, the core of successful CFA volunteer training delivery is volunteer based.

CFA's training framework, as demonstrated by the soon to be released CFA Operational Training Guide, relies very much on the willingness of volunteers to participate in the training of CFA members; put simply – CFA can't afford to train its members without involving its volunteers.

The role of Fiskville (or a facility like Fiskville) must not be underestimated; as a centrally based residential training facility it allows volunteers and paid staff to come together to be trained as the future trainers and assessors for the CFA workforce. Fiskville is the basis of training within CFA.

5. The importance of a residential training facility.

The structured, tiered system of training established in consideration of the varied and restricted availability of volunteers has been an effective way to ensure that Victoria is serviced by a large and competent force of members able to work in any part of the State.

Fireline safety for crews is dependent on compliance with well-established principles and practices of operation. During major fire emergencies this is only achievable when all crews and line commanders have been trained to and achieved the common established levels of competency.

They must all be “singing from the same hymn book”, as the saying goes.

We have already highlighted the need for a training facility where multi day training can be conducted. A residential facility provides a significant benefit arising from the after-hours interaction of course members during their leisure time. Inevitably, the members discuss the day’s training and share opinions and experiences that translate into an invaluable multiplier effect.

Course attendees get the opportunity to meet fellow members from all over the State, to broaden their knowledge base through conversations about their different experiences and to establish friendships and working relationships that have downstream benefits when they meet in an operational environment. The residential nature of the premises enables members to spend time training together, share experiences and to learn from each other.

Courses often involve multi agency attendance and the residential facility encourages inter-service conversations that build or contribute to improved understandings and working relationships. This is particularly valuable during advanced Incident Management training because it contributes to more effective integrated operations during emergencies. Apart from CFA Career Firefighter Recruit Courses, CFA conducts a wide range of specialist training programmes that require participation in a “live – in” environment. In the fire and emergency management sector there are many courses that are best conducted at a residential facility – especially one that has dedicated resources that facilitate the learning in a group setting.

Further to comments elsewhere in this submission, VFBV is firmly of the view that the availability of a centrally located residential training facility is vital to the future of well-trained CFA members.

Fiskville is not just a place that trains people in practical firefighting. It has been developed over many years as a multi-functional training facility that is an excellent residential training facility.

Any scaling back or indeed closure (temporarily or long term) of Fiskville will, without a doubt, severely impact CFA’s residential training program.

6. Fiskville’s many important functions.

Whilst the inquiry is directed at matters related to practical training activities, environmental issues and health impacts on individuals it is important to also consider the range of other functions and activities that have established Fiskville as the centrepiece in the CFA’s training arrangements and why it holds a special place in the minds of CFA members.

The most experienced and capable members of CFA, be they career staff or volunteers, would acknowledge that attendance at courses at Fiskville has been a major contributor to their knowledge and skills.

There are specialist facilities within the Teaching Complex that are essential to the conduct of advanced training, particularly in regard to roles associated with Incident Management and Command and Control. They feature relief maps and models of urban developments and industrial complexes that facilitate the simulation of scenarios where strategies and tactics can be discussed and debated. They are also used during promotional assessments.

The facilities are regularly used for the training and development of leadership skills for members, particularly for those who will be the future leaders in the organisation.

Members from Brigades that provide specialist services such as Road Accident Rescue, Urban Search and Rescue, Hazardous Materials Response, Trench Rescue are able to use the unique specialist training areas constructed at Fiskville.

Specialist instructors in areas such as Emergency Vehicle Driving, Off-road Driving, Air Observing, and specialist Incident Management roles are trained at Fiskville before returning to their own areas to teach a standard methodology and work practices that are critical to maintaining inter-operability and member safety.

In addition to the residential facilities and the practical training area, Fiskville boasts many features that are not available at CFA's other (regional) training facilities. It is the complete complex at the Fiskville site that actually makes Fiskville the core training establishment for the organisation.

The large Auditorium and the extensive range of meeting rooms are regularly used for organisational conferences and meetings, by a wide range of people – within and outside the emergency management sector.

Fiskville is the base for a range of specialist training courses that are best managed out of a single training establishment – rather than be spread across CFA's regional training grounds. Subjects such as Road Accident Rescue, Urban Search and Rescue, and Trench Rescue are based at Fiskville and volunteers from across the State attend centrally to be updated on their specialist skills.

As new training methods are developed, Fiskville offers course developers the opportunity to test the training package prior to introduction into CFA practice.

Fiskville is the site of the Memorial honouring those members who have died as a consequence of operational activities. It was selected as the memorial's site because of the special place that Fiskville holds in the development of CFA and because it is frequented by members from all over the State.

In CFA's own submission to the Joy Report, CFA states;

Fiskville is CFA's primary training facility and has been in operation since 1971. It is where most of our people have been trained and where the majority of our operational staff commenced their careers. Other service agencies also regularly send their people to train there. CFA uses the facility for graduation ceremonies, to celebrate the achievements of our people and to honour those who have lost their lives in the course of duty. Over time Fiskville has come to play a symbolic role in CFA, reflecting the ethos and commitment of CFA members to emergency service. (p. 6).

7. Transparency and independence.

In 2012, VFBV strongly advocated for the engagement of independent experts to ensure that there could be confidence in the findings about the quality of the fire water used at Fiskville and the safety of CFA members and others. We also sought from CFA their agreement for the full disclosure of the results of the initial assessment and on-going testing of the water.

We also sought assurances from CFA that they would establish further studies to address matters beyond the scope of Professor Joy's investigation particularly directed towards the cancer and health implications to members that had attended training facilities.

We understand that the interim closure of Fiskville for further testing of the water supplies was required, however we would be disappointed if the Committee's considerations of submissions and their subsequent report were to be pre-empted in any way by the fact that Fiskville remains closed at this time.

We support an independent assessment of the water quality and the application of suitable methods of dealing with any identified problem so that should Fiskville be declared safe to use, a full program of training can be resumed.

8. Remediation or closure.

There has been significant investment in remediation works and major changes and upgrades to practical training facilities at Fiskville since the 1990s. More recently there have been further decontamination and remediation works as a consequence of the findings and recommendations contained in Professor Joy's 2012 report.

We welcome the further investigation of the degree of success, or otherwise of the decontamination and remediation works carried out to date and of the need for and viability of any further works.

We are conscious of the fact that any proposal to permanently close Fiskville would still require the expenditure to undertake decontamination and remediation of the site prior to any future use by CFA or other parties.

Any decision about the future of Fiskville should also consider the investments made in relatively recent times to significantly upgrade the residential and catering facilities in order to both improve the standard of the facilities and increase capacity. These investments were part of the response to internal reviews of training needs and are consistent with the recommendations of the Jones Inquiry, specifically Recommendation 22 which states;

The CFA proceed with the update of facilities and infrastructure at Fiskville to enable its better utilisation by volunteers and employees for training. Where necessary, the Government support this update when determining CFA funding. (p. 169).

All existing fire training facilities available in the State operate at, or close to, capacity given the increased need to service CFA recruit training courses and constraints on the availability of volunteers that dictate their training must be done outside what might be considered normal hours. Any limitations on the use of Fiskville will create further pressures. As stated in the Jones Inquiry;

There are supply and demand issues relating to hot fire training at FTG's. This is most evident for the outer metropolitan and regional city brigades that would normally attend Fiskville. This is because its training schedule is increasingly dominated by career and recruit career firefighter courses. CFA acknowledges that the consequences

are serious. The brigades serviced by Fiskville are increasingly managing urban and structural risks. (p. 167).

Closure would severely impact on the accessibility and ability to maintain current levels of training at a time when there is a demand for increased access to training. It would also severely impact on the availability and conduct of the specialist training currently conducted there.

We acknowledge the new training facility constructed by MFB at Craigieburn may be future placed to service a limited number of CFA volunteer Brigades able to travel to the facility within a reasonable time frame. However it would not be readily accessible for all users of Fiskville who rely on the residential capacity available to them. Additionally, we have questions about the operation of the facility, the considerably higher cost of training delivery incurred by the use of the facility and its capacity to adequately meet the flexible requirements required to meet volunteer training time availability.

9. Conclusion.

CFA members need continued access to a residential training facility with realistic hot fire props able to simulate fire scenarios and provide valuable training experience. The established structure and system is a proven and effective model that must be maintained. Fiskville has the facilities in place required to continue its established role as the important central training establishment that trains the trainers, the specialists and the leaders. The proviso being that any identified need for remediation can be appropriately addressed.

There can be no reduction in the available capacity for training of members. On the contrary, previous studies and inquiries have identified that we need an increase in availability of training if we are to properly cater to the identified training needs. As noted by Jones in the CFA submission to the Jones Inquiry;

The need for volunteer training is increasing but the availability is reducing. Availability and accessibility to Fire Training Grounds is another consistent concern and issue raised at consultations and in submissions. It clearly is a major challenge for the CFA. (p. 167).

The CFA submission acknowledges that investing in training infrastructure is critically import. It states that the CFA Board has recently reviewed its commitment to training grounds and facilities, and acknowledges there has been an under-investment for decades. There is now a need for substantial investment. (p. 168).

Training is the foundation of professional emergency service delivery and of safe operations. Without appropriate training support to CFA volunteers, communities may be placed at risk and the capacity within Victoria to respond to emergencies may be reduced.