



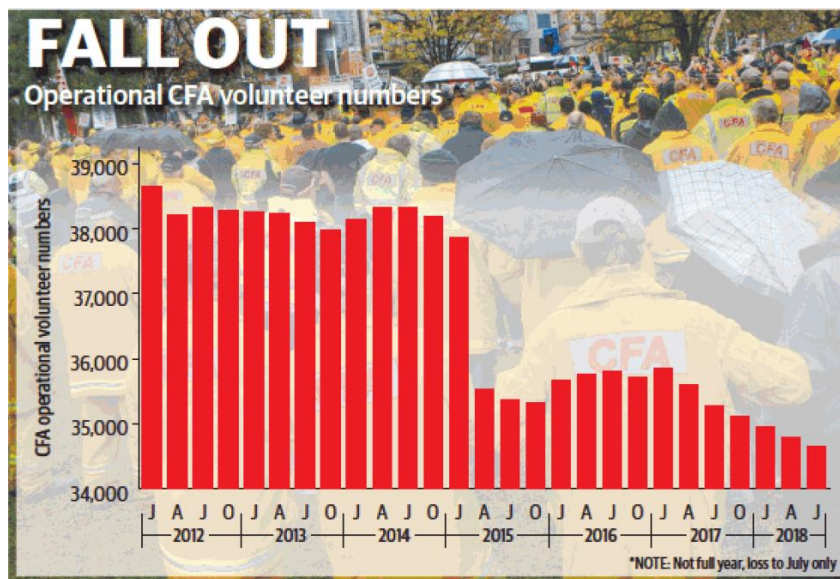
VOLUNTEER FIRE BRIGADES VICTORIA

TRANSCRIPT

16 November 2018

CEO ANDREW FORD INTERVIEWED ON DROP IN VOLUNTEER NUMBERS AND IMPORTANCE OF CFA PLEDGE

VFBV Chief Executive Officer Andrew Ford was interviewed by Nicole Chvastek on Regional ABC Drive on Wednesday 14th November, following an article appearing in this week's [Weekly Times](#) that has reported a loss of 3,534 of CFA operational volunteers over the last four years.



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Radio Interview Transcript

Nicole Well....volunteers.....CFA volunteers have drawn a line in the sand. They will be demanding from every state election candidate, doesn't matter what party you're associated with, clarification as to whether or not those candidates do or do not support the carve up of the CFA. As we head into another dangerous bushfire season the Weekly Times has revealed that the CFA has lost more than 3,500 of its operational volunteers since the end of 2014 and the CEO of VFBV has warned that the exodus has only just begun.

We requested an interview with James Merlino the Emergency Services Minister and he declined. Andrew Ford is the CEO of Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria. Andrew Ford – good afternoon.

Andrew Good afternoon Nicole.

Nicole So why are they leaving in droves Andrew Ford?

Andrew I think they are leaving, and members are telling us they are leaving because they have had enough of the Government's approach and attitude to CFA, the Government's current plans to carve CFA up, the Government talking the CFA down just to drive their political agenda – the political interference in CFA and the Government's secret deals with the union. The Government is breaking the heart of CFA volunteers - they don't want to leave but they find at the end of the day, it's just hurting them to stay.

Nicole Is it true - this report by the Weekly Times, that you've lost 3,534 operational volunteers since the end of 2014 – a 9% drop in your active firefighting force?

Andrew I don't have the numbers, CFA have those, but I have spoken to CFA today and understand the figures quoted in the Weekly Times article are accurate. My own view is that and based on what we know of the way numbers go, there is every chance the figures if they were available for October would be even worse, and in addition to those that might have come to the point of hanging up their yellows and leaving, there are others that I know have withdrawn and are really watching what happens in the forthcoming state election. I think we are seeing the tip of the iceberg and it really worries me

Nicole What do you mean the tip of the iceberg?

Andrew The Government has plans to carve CFA up – it has gone about a public campaign of bad mouthing the capacity and professionalism and service capability of volunteers, particularly in urban communities. Volunteers are sick of that, sick of the political interference in CFA and I have a constant stream of my members saying to me that we are really, really can't take this much longer and we will wait and see what comes towards the end of this year, particularly at this state election.

Nicole How many do you think will go?

Andrew I hate to think Nicole. We have put a lot of energy into trying to convince the Government that their flawed agenda to carve up CFA is wrong, is dangerous, is irresponsible – we've been on that path for some years and the reason we've invested so much in that, the reason people like Jane Garrett stood down as Minister, the reason CFA Board stood up and CFA Chief Officer and CEO, was because this is a very serious issue, and I think we could see many more – I'd hate to put a number on it because then you get called a doomsayer – but you know what – I want to have a clear conscience, if a bad Government policy kills off the CFA, I want to know that I can sleep at night trying to do everything we could to stop that from happening.

Nicole The trend is 1,000 a year we're losing.

Andrew The trend is, the net loss - is what I think the Weekly Times article points out. There's always volunteers coming and going. CFA does enormous work and really good work to continue to recruit volunteers and I have spoken to CFA today, and they confirmed that the intake of vols and the supply of volunteers from their recruitment effort is still strong, and pretty consistent year in and year out. So that shows the supply is there, but there are people hanging up their boots and leaving, and you're right, so the drop over last 4 years is a big drop in numbers, I think it's nearly 10% reduction in operational capacity.

That's got to get Victorians to wake up and say what's happening here? The volunteer capacity in the state, the potential is enormous, it's been proven year in, year out, and yet we've got a Government that wants to slap it in the face – it's just beyond belief.

- Nicole** You say that this is the tip of the iceberg, they are leaving at the rate of 1,000 a year, can you see that stopping any time soon?
- Andrew** No I can't. I could see it stopping if we have a change of heart.
- Nicole** What you mean is a change of Government.
- Andrew** No - I mean a change of heart. We need the policy that proposes to carve CFA up taken off the table, however that gets taken off the table is up to the public of Victoria at the end of the day. We either need to convince the Government that it's a bad plan and they should need to change their mind and give it a rethink – we need to convince individual politicians to have a rethink and actually as we have asked, pledge their support to not carve the CFA up, or a change of Government would take that policy off the table.
- Nicole** The policy is off the table isn't it Andrew? The legislation underpinning the dismantling of the CFA was defeated in the Upper House.
- Andrew** This is the alarm bell I need to ring to your listeners today. Most people in the community actually think that the issue is off the table because it was defeated back at Easter in the Upper House of the Victorian parliament – all that means is it is lying in wait. The Premier Daniel Andrews confirmed a about a week or so ago that if re-elected, the Andrews Government will pursue the policy, which is to pursue the policy to dismantle CFA. Now that is a live issue, that is dependant on who is in Government come December.
- Nicole** What will you be doing in terms of contacting each and every candidate standing for this election?
- Andrew** Ok - We've written to every candidate, from all parties and all independents, asking for them to take a pledge or fess up to not taking the pledge, but asking them to take a pledge that they will not commit to any action essentially that would dismantle CFA, other than action that might be recommended by an expert and independent transparent review process, and also to commit to absolute genuine consultation with volunteers before any change is made.
- We've established a website people can visit – supportCFAVolunteers.com.au - where we will be identifying which way candidates have pledged. If they pledge to support CFA we should applaud them, if they are not yet decided I'm asking the community and our members to work with them to try and convince them of the right thing to do and explain the folly of going ahead with a carve up of CFA, and if they are not taking the pledge, in other words if they don't support the continuation of CFA in its current form, they ought to be brave enough to speak up, and we are saying to people we can't tell you how to vote, we won't tell you how to vote, VFBV is non-party political, but vote with your eyes wide open.
- Nicole** The Government says that the carve up in fact is about modernising the firefighting services that have for too long operated under a model which was constructed decades ago. That's urban communities are growing at an expediential rate, and that it is time to reconfigure the firefighting services to reflect that. What's wrong with that?
- Andrew** So first up that is absolute political spin, the biggest load of rubbish that I've ever heard. The reality is Nicole the proposal that is on the table is designed to do one thing, and its designed to give the union more control over the fire services of Victoria and designed to get the union's Enterprise Bargaining Agreement through the Fair Work Commission process without it having to meet provisions that don't erode the capacity of volunteers. The proposal does nothing – nothing at all, and this is factually provable, does nothing at all to add additional resources to the fire services, does nothing to improve the flexibility of fire services ability to grow with growing community service demands and will in fact restrict it further and limit it.

The other thing the public need to know is, the CFA model of course it was established more than 50 years ago, but it has evolved every year as communities evolved, and the model already has the capacity to supplement volunteers with paid firefighters where busy urban communities need more support. That model is world renowned – it works, it works in heavily urbanised communities – it not only saves Victoria hundreds of millions of dollars every year, it is the most flexible model going, and the Government is looking to carve it up.

They are looking to break up the fire services, when all the recent major reviews including the Black Saturday Royal Commission talked about joining the fire services up more and the fire services working together – the Government is spinning their way out of a secret deal with the union.

Nicole So what is your concern as we face yet another dangerous fire season, and at the same time we're bleeding firefighting volunteers?

Andrew My concern is that what people are wondering about what might happen now as we look at the election of the 24th November, that come the 26th November if the policy is actually still on the table, we are going to have a firefighting service limping into this fire season with broken hearts and a knowledge that the CFA as we know it today, is on the cusp of being destroyed, so that's my concern for this fire season.

Volunteers will do what needs to be done, they will work to their last ounce of energy to protect their communities, but there will be a heavy weight around the neck of the fire services. My big concern is that for the years ahead, I think we are on a very slippery slope to dire consequence. I actually think Nicole this is a defining moment for Victoria and I really do ask the community to wake up, and stand up and see the fact that the CFA problem is not off the table, it's very clearly there and if the policy goes ahead to dismantle CFA, we're in a lot of trouble into the future.

Nicole What do you mean – you talk about dire consequences – what is that code for?

Andrew I mean we won't have the capacity that we've drawn on in previous years to meet major fires. An enormous part of Victoria's major firefighting capacity is drawn from volunteers in outer metropolitan Melbourne, in provincial centres and townships across Victoria. The Govt. model will be a very clear start, and deliberate move to start diminishing the role of volunteers in those urbanised communities, downgrading it, discouraging it and in future where we've had huge numbers of volunteers drawn on from those places for the Black Saturday fires, the Great Alpine fires, a whole range of fires, they won't be there.

And to put it into perspective, the California fires that are getting a lot of air play at the moment – tragic and sad and our hearts go out to those people who have lost lives, and loved ones and property – a hundred thousand hectares.

The Great Alpine fires of 2006 in Victoria were 1.3M hectares – many many many more firefighters deployed to those fires than in the California fires. 19,000 volunteers and paid firefighters deployed to the Black Saturday fires - take 10% off that number, you're down about 500 fire trucks – its simple maths.

Nicole Andrew Ford thank you again, CEO of VFBV.