

2009 VICTORIAN BUSHFIRES ROYAL COMMISSION  
Letters Patent issued 16 February 2009

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**STATEMENT OF ALLAN SMALL**

I, Allan Small, of 324 Forest Road, The Basin, Victoria say as follows:

**Introduction**

1. My name is Allan Small. I am the former Governor of the Coburg Prisons Complex, now retired. I have been a volunteer fire-fighter since 1967 and continue to actively serve as a volunteer in the CFA.
2. The purpose of this statement is to provide to the 2009 Victoria Bushfires Royal Commission information in relation to the training of volunteer fire-fighters.
3. Unless stated otherwise, this statement contains information from my own knowledge and experience.

**Qualifications and experience**

*Relevant work history*

4. I held the position of Governor of the Coburg Prisons Complex for approximately five years, until the complex closed and I retired in

1998. Prior to assuming the role of Governor I was the Deputy Governor, or Operations Manager of the Pentridge Prison Complex for three years.

5. I was previously a senior manager with the Victorian Office of Corrections for approximately ten years having started as a prison officer in 1980. During that time I performed the role of inspector with the prisons' Inspectorate Division, which dealt with emergency management within the prison system including riots, prison crime, escapes from custody and fire management.
6. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Inspectorate Division was responsible for introducing into all Victorian prisons a unified modern fire fighting regime, in consultation with the CFA and MFB. In addition to developing the processes and policies comprising the regime, this task involved training of prison staff in relation to fire management.
7. I oversaw the integration process, together with another inspector. We were selected to oversee the integration process because of our respective fire fighting experience.
8. Victorian prisons previously operated independently and according to internally developed fire management regimes. Integrating the Victorian Prison fire management regime took several years.

*Volunteer fire fighting history*

9. I joined the CFA in 1967, when I was twenty years of age. I have been in active service as a volunteer since that time, with the exception of a break from 1969 to 1971 during which time I served in the Australian army in Vietnam.

10. When I first became a volunteer I served as a fire-fighter with The Basin Fire Brigade, one of eight brigades within the Knox Fire Brigade Group (KFBG).
11. After my return from Vietnam I was promoted to the position of Officer. At that time, the hierarchy within each brigade was comprised of a Captain, and in descending order of seniority a First, Second, Third and Fourth Officer. I rose through each Officer position within about 10 years before becoming Captain, a position which I held for twenty-two years.
12. In addition to my local role with The Basin Brigade, I held concurrent roles at the Group and Regional levels.
13. I commenced the position of Deputy Group Officer for the KFBG in 1977.
14. The KFBG managed the planning and co-ordination and strategic operational issues of the eight brigades comprising the KFBG. The hierarchy within the KFBG was similarly comprised of a Group Officer, being the most senior manager and four Deputy Officers, in descending order of seniority. I held each Deputy Officer position and became Group Officer of the KFBG in July of 2000. I held that position until mid 2009.
15. I also served as a delegate of the Regional Planning Committee (Region 13). There were variously four or five sub-committees of the RPC, which were responsible for reviewing, advising, recommending and endorsing where appropriate, matters relating to the management of Region 13. The RPC was comprised of senior volunteers and CFA paid managers.
16. I have undertaken the necessary training for the positions of Strike Team Leader and Sector Commander and Planning Officer.

17. I have also obtained the following qualifications;
  - Certificate II in fire fighting operations;
  - All elements required for the role of Operations Officer, (Level 3 IMT);
  - All elements required for the role of Planning Officer, (Level 3 IMT).
  
18. I have held functional Incident Management Team positions in major bushfires throughout Victoria and New South Wales for over ten years, including:
  - 18.1. Level 3 Incident Controller;
  - 18.2. Deputy Incident Controller;
  - 18.3. Operations Officer;
  - 18.4. Deputy Operations Officer;
  - 18.5. Division Commander;
  - 18.6. Sector Commander;
  - 18.7. Planning Officer.
  
19. I was endorsed as a Level 3 Incident Management positions in the 08 to 09 bushfire season, although I was not utilised in that role during the Black Saturday fires.
  
20. While I have not been notified of my current endorsement for this bushfire season I anticipate that I will again be endorsed as a Level 3 Incident Management Team role.
  
21. At the time of making this statement I am aware that there are currently serious fire warnings for Region 13. I am formally nominated as being available for the position of Level 3 Incident Management

Controller and all other IMT positions and will perform those roles if called upon to do so over the next few days and in the coming months.

### **The CFA Training System**

22. The CFA training system is fundamentally flawed, insofar as it relates to senior volunteer fire-fighters.
23. It is almost impossible for volunteer fire-fighters to obtain the necessary qualifications to advance beyond the position of Crew Leader, irrespective of their in-field experience, talent, managerial experience, local knowledge and contacts and willingness to learn.
24. In my view, these difficulties arise from the following facts:
  - 24.1. The CFA process for volunteer fire-fighters to advance to managerial positions above Crew Leader is subjective and ad hoc;
  - 24.2. As volunteer fire-fighters advance in seniority they are marginalised and effectively deprived of the opportunity to undertake the training necessary to obtain senior management positions;
  - 24.3. There are insufficient numbers of trainers and opportunities available to provide senior level training to volunteers at times and venues that are accessible to volunteers;
  - 24.4. Training is often scheduled at times and in formats that do not attract optimal volunteer participation.
25. The failure to provide to volunteers accessible training and opportunities for advancement within the CFA organisational structure is a serious defect in the State's fire fighting capacity. As a

result, the volunteer fire-fighters are a seriously under-utilised resource.

26. The current CFA training regime creates practical difficulties for volunteer fire-fighters. The courses offered by the CFA are generally of 4 or 5 days duration conducted on weekdays. Volunteer fire-fighters cannot attend courses that interfere with their usual employment.
27. The failure of the CFA to offer more courses held over two or three weekends, or in "off campus" style study as an alternative is inexplicable, having regard to the number of volunteers that are excluded from undertaking training because of this practical impediment.
28. Currently, CFA courses are also not easily accessible to volunteers because they are held at venues that require a significant amount of travel for volunteers.
29. In addition to the difficulties associated with obtaining access to training opportunities, the current position is that most out of pocket costs associated with undertaking that training are borne by the volunteer. In other words, if a volunteer managed to obtain time off work during the normal working week to attend a training course over a few days the loss of normal wages is borne by the volunteer in the absence of a compassionate or encouraging employer. The combination of these factors acts as a disincentive to qualified and otherwise skilled people rising through the ranks.
30. If a volunteer fire-fighter seeks to advance into a managerial role above Crew Leader they are seriously disadvantaged. As a consequence, volunteer fire-fighters are required to develop managerial skills on-the-job, that is to say, in the course of fire fighting, rather than in a formal training environment. While there is no substitute for experience on

the ground, formal training is essential for the reinforcement of organisational structure. First, an important way of ensuring that organisational structure is maintained in the field is to ensure that the most experienced and respected fire fighters in the field are formally trained. Second, and if not more important, access to formal training opportunities is a one way to identify volunteers with the capability of assuming positions of significant responsibility in an emergency.

31. In addition to the practical difficulties faced by volunteer fire-fighters in accessing CFA training, there are limited spaces available to volunteers in CFA programs at senior levels. As career fire-fighters are required to undertake training at senior levels to advance their careers paid staff are preferentially selected to take up positions in training programs. Consequently there are very few spaces available for volunteer staff in training programs at senior levels in any event.
32. This constitutes a further impediment to volunteer fire-fighters obtaining the training necessary to advance into senior management positions.
33. The volunteer fire-fighters' concerns about the scheduling, structure and location of CFA training courses have been raised with the CFA on numerous occasions, as has the clear preference for career CFA staff to fill available courses. The CFA has failed to address these concerns.

#### **Incident Management Capability Development Program**

34. Volunteer fire-fighters in Region 13 are most commonly required to respond to structural fires in a mostly urban environment.
35. In 2007, KFBG decided to develop the its own training program to enable volunteer fire fighters in our Group to develop the skills

necessary to manage a Level 2 fire/incident of any kind, including bushfires. The CFA does not at this time have a training regime to skill members as a Level 2 Incident Controller. The only option is to undertake training in L3 AIIMS functional positions, or sub positions.

36. It took two years to develop the course and a significant amount of petitioning the CFA to enable the course to proceed. We were required to obtain permission from the Learning and Development division of the CFA. The course was recently held over five weekends in mid 2009. Region 13 now has 15 volunteer fire-fighters who have the necessary skills to manage a Level 2 fire. The training program is called "Incident Management Capability Development Program". Without this program volunteer fire-fighters would not otherwise have been able to be nominated for or act in the position of Level 2 Incident Controller. This model (weekend training programs) worked very well and I see no reason why a training module designed to train volunteers at more senior levels (eg Level 3 IMT positions) could not be more readily and frequently employed by the CFA itself to bridge the gap in available training opportunities in the future.
37. The practical difficulties faced by volunteer fire-fighters seeking training at a senior level are exacerbated by the fact that there are limited numbers of operational trainers. The enterprise bargaining agreement applicable to CFA career fire-fighters provides that paid trainers must be selected from CFA career staff. The applicable EBA specifically restricts the ability of volunteers to be employed in career training roles. The applicable EBA also limits CFA's ability to draw from suitable volunteers to be engaged in sessional paid training instructor roles. There is also an underutilisation of volunteers who would be willing to deliver training, as volunteers, unpaid.



38. Region 13 has a few permanent training officers. These are paid positions. This has proved to be immensely beneficial for the volunteer fire-fighters in this region. Access to courses has been improved. volunteers and career training staff in Region 13 work well together despite the existence of practical barriers between volunteers and paid staff imposed by the industrial relations situation.

### **Black Saturday**

39. In my opinion, the trained volunteers are not efficiently utilised.
40. There is, in my experience, a preference or bias for paid staff to be placed in positions of responsibility.
41. Again, in my opinion, this is misguided. A person qualified as a Level 2 or Level 3 incident controller should be trained and tested to that level and capable of fulfilling that role. Whether that person is a volunteer or paid staff should make no difference in the execution of task.
42. To my knowledge there is no evidence or basis to suggest that qualified volunteers should be treated any differently to paid staff at the same level. However, in my experience I am aware both through anecdotal evidence and personal experience, that the CFA management does make resource allocation decisions that prefer the utilisation of paid staff over volunteers who have made themselves available and are able to serve.
43. I provide one example in the context of the Black Saturday fires from my personal experience to illustrate the point.
44. On Black Saturday I was in charge of the KFBG at the Knox Fire Brigades Group Emergency Coordination Centre in Boronia (HQ). Due to the expected weather and fire conditions I activated our HQ at

approximately 0800 hours. My first priority was to ensure that all brigades within Region 13 were appropriately staffed with sufficient numbers of volunteers.

45. I contacted each of the brigade duty officers or their captains by telephone to ascertain that they had enough staff to man their strike team vehicles and for home security, that is, vehicle response capacity for their local area. That took approximately one hour. The pre determined Strike Team units were operational, sufficiently staffed and ready to activate.
46. During the course of the day the KFBG deployed almost all of the available 21 operational first response vehicles, either on Strike Teams or on individual tasking. There were two vehicles that were not utilised. To my knowledge, this level of first response vehicle deployment resourcing was unprecedented in Region 13.
47. In my role as Group Officer it was my decision to activate HQ as part of the pre-planning process to ready the Region for a 'hot start' due the expected severe fire weather conditions. On the day before Black Saturday the CFA published a request for all available Level 3 IMT personnel to assist in the management of the Black Saturday fires. I advised that I was available. I had put in place sufficient Deputy Group Officers to assume my HQ role in the event that I was called upon to act as Level 3 Controller. I was not at any time called upon to perform that role during the Black Saturday fire.

#### **The Woori Yallock ICC - The King Lake/ Healesville complex**

48. Approximately a week after February 7, CFA management asked me to fill the role of Deputy Incident Controller at the Woori Yallock ICC during the day, for three days (Monday to Wednesday) as part of the

ongoing management of the King Lake to Healesville fire complex that continued to burn after Black Saturday. I agreed to do so.

49. Late Sunday evening, the night before I was to attend as Deputy Incident Controller, and after I had put in place personal arrangements to take on this task, I received a phone call from CFA management who advised me not to attend the ICC as I was not needed. No explanation was provided to me as to why I was not required and I was not asked if I would be available at any other time.
50. I visited the ICC the following Tuesday. I thought I would go along and lend a hand if needed. I also wanted to obtain a view of how the fires were progressing and the strategies that were being employed to fight the fires. I thought that it would be good for my own knowledge and development to see what was going on first hand in the strategies being implemented to manage the fire complex.
51. I discovered that a senior CFA career staff member had filled the position of Deputy Incident Controller. I knew the CFA staff member fulfilling the role. There is not doubt that the person fulfilling this role was appropriate for the position.
52. The point I make is that I had made myself available for three full days to the CFA as a Level 3 Deputy Incident Controller in the wake of the worst bushfires in memory. I was not utilised in any way despite my skill and availability during that three day period other than to the extent that I voluntarily attended the ICC to “help out” if needed. The post I was originally designated to fill was filled by a paid employee and I was sidelined without explanation. Given what was happening at that time it seems to me to be a ridiculous waste of available resources in a time of emergency not to have both me and the paid employee fully utilised.

53. These incidents reflect a wider cultural issue within the CFA and DSE. That is, the systematic preference for paid CFA staff members to fulfil senior management roles, notwithstanding the availability of volunteer fire-fighters with commensurate skill and experience.
54. In my view, the body of volunteer fire-fighters is a resource that is under-utilised and poorly managed. The failure of the State to develop and maximise this valuable resource has a negative impact on the fire fighting ability of the CFA and disadvantages the community.

Dated: 17 November 2009

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Allan Small