



4<sup>th</sup> February 2020

**Parliamentarians & Hon Members of Parliament  
Parliament House  
Spring Street  
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002**

Dear Parliamentarian,

**Re: 2019/20 FIRE SEASON AND SUPPORT FOR CFA VOLUNTEERS**

Welcome to the new year, and the first sitting week of Parliament for the year. I trust each of you had a safe and welcome break over the Christmas and New Year period, although I acknowledge that many of you have shared with us the high workload emanating from a very busy fire season.

On behalf of volunteer firefighters right across Victoria, I want to extend our gratitude and appreciation to all of you who have supported us thus far in this seasons spate of ferocious bushfires impacting countless communities right across this great State.

Your visits, assistance and words of encouragement to our members have been very welcome. From the Premier, Ministers and shadow Ministers, right through to local members whose electorates cover fire affected areas – thank-you.

Our firefighters have been tireless in the face of this season's monumental challenges. Their efforts have been magnificent. And the impacts profound. We mourn the loss of each outstanding Victorian who have lost their lives, as well as each of the firefighters from NSW, Victoria and the United States each with proud histories of community service who have paid the ultimate sacrifice in standing to protect their communities. Many firefighters have also been injured selflessly defending communities across the country.

We share the pain of those who have lost their properties and livelihood, including a number of our own volunteers who lost homes while out protecting others. We are also deeply saddened by the immense impact on our wildlife and fauna. The outpouring of support and fundraising efforts has been greatly received by us all.

Many of you have been in contact with me over the summer to offer your support, seek our reflections on the future and asking how you can best support our incredible CFA volunteers. There is no short answer to any of these questions, however this correspondence will endeavour to summarise and outline several of the key themes front of mind as we continue discussions on the future of CFA and priority areas for support.

And while this year's fire season is far from over, we agree with the myriad of experts from our scientific community that Victoria's fire seasons are likely to continue getting longer, and the frequency of significant weather events will continue to rise. As one of the most fire prone areas in the world, it is therefore critical that Victoria plan ahead, and leverage the incredible breadth and quantum of Victoria's emergency management volunteer capacity and capability. As we and countless others have warned previously, once it

is lost – it will be very difficult to rebuild, so it is critical we all work to protect and defend it from harm and encourage and support it to be everything it can be.

Given the journey of the last few years, many of you have asked me for my assessment of our current relationship with Government and progress on the fire service changes to be given effect later this year.

VFBV is committed to working constructively with all sides of Parliament. This has been the traditional hallmark of VFBV (and predecessor urban and rural volunteer associations) relationship with past governments, whether Labor or Coalition.

It's timely to remember that the late Premier John Cain supported CFA volunteers after Ash Wednesday with a sizeable investment. More recently he, and other members of his past government, were amongst the signatures on VFBV's petition to parliament for CFA volunteer cancer compensation rights.

We also remember the strong support of the Bracks/Brumby Governments in the creation of the CFA Volunteer Charter, the CFA Strategic Resource Initiative with important additions to volunteer training and equipment, supplementation of CFA volunteer brigade fundraising for the purchase of vehicles, equipment and brigade station upgrades and, importantly, the enduring respect paid to volunteers for the selfless work they do for community safety.

The Baillieu/Ryan government continued this support for CFA volunteers and there was bipartisan support for changes to the CFA Act in 2011 to reflect the CFA's volunteer-based character, require that CFA employees work to expand volunteer service capacity and to give the CFA Volunteer Charter legal effect.

All these things demonstrate the strong relationship between volunteers and Victorian governments. We would like to see these days reborn.

I'm pleased to say that our relationship with Government now seems to have much improved over more recent years of rancour and division. Our relationship with our new Minister, the Hon Lisa Neville MP has so far been constructive, and respectful. Dialog has resumed and diligent work undertaken to understand and appreciate our differences and perspectives.

While there remain issues on which we disagree when it comes to the fire service changes, we have built a respectful and honest relationship that should allow Government to consider the views of volunteers in its deliberations while respecting our role under the CFA Volunteer Charter.

However, there remains considerable work and challenges ahead. This will require cool heads, and a commitment to engage and work constructively across all parties in building confidence and trust in any future arrangements. On the areas we disagree, we will attempt to mitigate or prevent harm to community safety while maintaining our frank and fearless advice and working hard to remain constructive and objective.

I will continue to express a desire for more open communications between volunteers and all members of Parliament, and hence my motivation for this open letter. I am seeking an opportunity to keep all members regularly apprised of important issues affecting CFA volunteers and their communities. I would therefore welcome any opportunities to continue these conversations and discuss these priorities face to face with any MP's that wish it.

My hope is to build a greater awareness, support and respect for the incredible work our volunteers do in our communities, while building consensus and priority for tangible and practical ways to best support and encourage them as they work tirelessly protecting our communities.

During the season so far, and evident in the heightened media presence has been yours and the communities respect and appreciation for the sacrifices and commitment made by emergency management volunteers. Common in volunteer discussions is a desire for that recognition to translate into meaningful actions. As I have previously remarked, we cannot afford to wait every 10 or so years for the value and power of Victoria's

volunteer surge capacity to be remembered during extraordinary fire seasons like the one we are experiencing now. And while it's easy to take it for granted because it's been there so long, our and your legacy, like those of our predecessors, will be in what shape it is left for future generations.

Volunteers appreciate your kind words and are extremely grateful for the sentiments behind them. Their hope is that you will similarly work with us to improve arrangements, strengthen CFA and repay their sacrifices in partnering with them to build safer and more resilient communities. Priority areas include:

### **Infrastructure, Trucks and Equipment**

Volunteers continue to express serious concerns with the insufficient level of ongoing funding for CFA's capital budget. Current CFA budgets, no matter how well improved over previous years continue to be unsustainable and inadequate to fund essential infrastructure, trucks, equipment and protective clothing. Reliant on single year grants or one-off project funding to replace ageing assets prevents CFA being able to establish or plan for long-term sustainable asset replacement. Many CFA trucks are now exceeding 30 years of age, with current capital budgets insufficient to lower the fleet age profile. The fleet continues to get older and is already one of the oldest in Australia.

CFA volunteers are routinely required to fundraise and tin rattle in their own time to raise money for vital station improvements, truck replacement, equipment and uniforms. This is time that could be spent with their families and loved ones, career development or on much deserved rest. No other workplace would tolerate employees having to donate or fundraise to build their office or pay for cleaning services, yet we expect CFA volunteers to do this routinely.

We need support for long-term, multiyear funding that will achieve fair and equitable capital funding to the same high standards as other Fire Services in Victoria.

### **Consultation**

As we move forward, and tackle even greater challenges, volunteers need a meaningful voice at the table. Volunteer consultation needs to be a genuine two-way process and not simply perfunctory. It needs to be done before decisions are made and done within a system that it is actually capable and effective in influencing outcomes. Put simply, it needs to be treated with far more respect than has often been forthcoming over recent years. We are in constructive discussions with the Government and CFA about what that process may look like, but we will need your assistance to make it a reality. Strengthening and operationalising the Volunteer Charter is a key priority and requires a genuine commitment and focus.

The truth is CFA volunteers now find themselves operating in a consultation framework that is unfair and inequitable. Despite the fact that they are members of CFA, volunteers do not have the same legal rights and protections as employees, yet they do the same work, operate in the same workplaces and are subject to the same risks as paid staff.

They do not have the benefit of external or independent appeal processes and the system relies entirely on their goodwill and good faith to operate. When that goodwill is exploited or taken for granted— it not only damages the here and now – it leaves behind a legacy of distrust and cynicism that lasts long into the future.

Fire and emergency agencies are now required to operate under effective veto and consult and agree clauses that by design exclude all other parties and stakeholders other than just one. In a sector that relies on interoperability and people working together as one – you can start to see the inherent difficulty this framework presents for all remaining stakeholders, including volunteers.

## **Training**

Volunteers remain deeply critical and highly dissatisfied with the training arrangements provided to them. In particular, volunteers year after year report through our annual survey that there are not enough training opportunities in formats, at times and at locations that make it easy for them to participate.

Simply increasing the number of courses will not solve the problem. There has to be a cultural and organisational change in the way CFA provides volunteer training. Long-term investment and significant organisational and cultural change as to how training is provided and delivered to volunteers is urgently required. Removal of barriers such as restrictive training staff availability arrangements and poor training ground access and arrangements would be a great start. But long-term investment in building and supporting a volunteer instructor pool that can best adapt and meet the unique needs of volunteers is essential for the future.

## **Secondment of Middle Management**

Volunteers continue to express deep concern about the future arrangements for secondment of its operational middle management under the FRV/CFA split. Details of the secondment arrangement, who it covers, what input volunteers will have and how the CFA Chief Officer will exercise control continue to be unclear.

Anxiety is building among volunteers that under the strict interpretation of section 51 of the reform legislation [25C(4)] the CFA Chief Officer is not permitted to refuse any FRV employee put up for secondment if they were previously a MFB or CFA employee. This would leave the CFA Chief Officer unable to even refuse employees who have displayed no empathy for volunteers and may in fact have exhibited blatant anti-volunteer behaviours in the past.

This is at odds with the commitment given to Parliament that the CFA Chief Officer would have complete control, and creates a situation that the CFA Chief Officer would have to accept any former employee (even those who previously worked for the MFB) for management, leadership and support roles in a CFA converted to a fully volunteer firefighter organisation. One way of respecting volunteers is to ensure they and their Chief Officer have a role in determining who the organisation appoints to these critical roles, the skills background and empathy of those officers, and the roles are structured and updated to reflect the important role of employees within CFA to support the recruitment, development and retention of volunteers.

## **Drop in Volunteer Numbers and Surge Capacity**

As you are aware, large fires require the mobilisation and deployment of thousands of volunteers to fight them while their local patch still has sufficient volunteers and equipment for required fire and emergency response.

Longer and more intense fire seasons, as well as an increase in frequency of multiple concurrent events, require a very large force of volunteer firefighters. As this season has shown, we can't always rely on pulling down reserves from other State's should they also be impacted.

Large numbers of volunteers have traditionally been drawn from all over the State, with highly urban/populated communities responsible for contributing a very large number of additional volunteers for state-wide surge capacity. The impact of FRV and associated change will be felt most strongly in these highly urban densely populated communities.

Volunteers require respect, recognition and a purpose for them to continue to be engaged. Training, volunteer support and operational utilisation are also critical factors in retaining them and maintaining operational readiness for deployment.

The fact is, Victoria's number of volunteer firefighters is at its lowest level in history. We remain very concerned that this frontline ready force may continue to be diminished with the conversion of CFA areas to

FRV in urban and regional areas later this year. It remains to be seen what moving volunteers to 'support' only roles will have on long term numbers as will the rate at which the FRV footprint is expanded. Historical evidence demonstrates that when volunteer roles are diminished or they feel their contribution is no longer valued or respected, they disengage. For many volunteers, this means finding a different avenue with a different organisation where their contribution to their community is better spent.

Experienced volunteer firefighters take many, many years to grow, develop and train. Current volunteer statistics only report on the gross numbers of volunteers 'on the books', and therefore reflect 'new joins' the day they register or graduate. Volunteer resignations only counts those volunteers who have formally resigned. These factors mask the true impact of the significant years of service being lost from the organisation when veteran volunteer firefighters move on, or where they simply 'withdraw' or reduce their services without formally resigning.

Detractors of our argument say that CFA only draws down just over half of its available numbers each year. This ignores the fact that of course not every volunteer will be available at exactly the same time. The ratio of available firefighters to those in use at any one time is built into fire service long term planning. For example, career firefighters are planned for by a 1:5 ratio that means for every firefighter on shift, you have to hire 5 to account for planned leave and off shift time. It is the same for volunteers. A cradle to grave volunteer model ensures flexibility to account for changes in lifestyle and career/family changes, or life pressures such as starting a family or new business. A flexible model that buffers this ebb and flow of availability is key to its long-term success and sustainability.

This narrative is not about apportioning blame. The fact is we have less CFA volunteers than ever before, and the demands on the system are getting higher. This year's reports from interstate services experiencing volunteer overcommitment that in some cases has hurt their livelihoods provides early warning signs that current pools are becoming strained, and therefore need to be grown and topped up.

Volunteers are calling for bi-partisan support for initiatives that protect, encourage, support and strengthen Victoria's emergency management volunteer surge capacity to best prepare Victoria for future disasters. Clearly, Victorians continue to be attracted to joining CFA as volunteers as demonstrated through healthy recruiting figures. Declining satisfaction among CFA volunteers is a serious threat to retaining them. Recruitment, retention and respect go hand in hand with ensuring Victoria has a volunteer pool strong and resilient enough to meet future peak load demands. Volunteers need meaningful roles to motivate and encourage them.

### **Bullying, Harassment and Discipline**

The issue of bullying and harassment in the fire services continues to be an issue of concern raised in member surveys. Members who participated in the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission review remain deeply saddened that this work remains unfinished.

Volunteers more generally are disappointed that the fire services sector as a whole is not being better supported to investigate and weed out instances of systemic bullying and harassment across the services.

Volunteers have long been expressing concern for the inadequacies of the current discipline systems and processes, and the inherent conflict of interest pertaining to fire service officers in effect investigating themselves.

VFBV has raised the potential for a 'Volunteer Ombudsman' type role that might be created to provide some external oversight and appeal mechanisms. This role could include monitoring and process checks and balances for how these kinds of matters are dealt with, and by whom. The ability for volunteers to access independent representation, legal counsel and other support to assist them when they are involved in matters of dispute are long overdue.

## Change Impacts

VFBV's fundamental objections, analysis, and warnings have been well documented and presented on public record during the Fire Organisation Reform debates. We do not however, seek to keep re-prosecuting arguments of the past and be caught in a never-ending cycle of dispute.

While we stand by our views, we are committed to working in good faith and with good will, being pragmatic and looking towards the future. VFBV's commitment to CFA volunteers and public safety is unwavering and we will continue to use our voice to advocate strongly for each.

It is clear to us that many may have underestimated the complexity of how particular future arrangements would work. We will need to remain vigilant to monitor any unintended consequences and be ready to mitigate any that are detrimental to the women and men that make CFA the incredible volunteer organisation that it is.

This fire season, you have again witnessed the current CFA model in action. Significant change to the model will commence as of July this year. CFA has once again stepped up to deliver an incredibly powerful integrated response. Isolated examples from this season have provided an insight into some of the problems that have potential to emerge under the new model proposed for implementation later this year. Some employee's have used EB arrangements proposed under the 2016 EB to justify not working for or under well experienced and qualified CFA volunteer leaders acting in senior leadership roles such as Sector Commander and Strike Team Leader. Because these EB arrangements have not been widely implemented, we have been able to avoid large scale disenfranchisement. However, if the culture of segregation is allowed to prosper, and volunteer experience or leadership is allowed to be systematically dismissed, the fragile relationship and respect between volunteer firefighters and career staff intended to work together will deteriorate. In a sector that relies on such close cooperation, this will be a key challenge. We are working with Government to try and identify solutions, but progress has been slow.

VFBV and volunteers are committed to building the best CFA possible, and as it has this season as in seasons past - ensuring it remains capable and best placed to protecting Victorian's long into the future. I would welcome your support and assistance in addressing the issues outlined above and would be happy to discuss further thoughts and priorities. These priorities should not overshadow the magnificent work that has been undertaken so far this fire season, and rather compliment an enduring commitment to support and protect those members of our fire services who selflessly put others first protecting lives and property.

Again, thank you all for your support for CFA volunteers. But it is time that support is put into action. So many volunteers place their lives on the line throughout the fire season and throughout the year because they love their communities, both near and far. They do not want to be paid. But they want the trucks, equipment and training they need. They want their brigades to flourish and capacity and encouragement to grow. They want their voices to be heard.

I look forward to working with you all to make that happen.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Adam Barnett', with a large, stylized flourish underneath.

Adam Barnett  
Chief Executive Officer