

Association of Volunteer Bush Fire Brigades of WA Incorporated

representing the interests of 26,000 volunteer fire fighters



The Principal Research Officer
Community Development and Justice Standing Committee
Legislative Assembly
Parliament House
PERTH WA 6000

Dear David

RE: INQUIRY INTO THE STATE'S PREPAREDNESS FOR THIS YEAR'S FIRE SEASON

This submission is made on behalf of the Association of Volunteer Bush Fire Brigades of WA Incorporated (AVBFB) representing over 26 000 Volunteer Bush Fire fighters from over 580 Brigades.

Through the remainder of this document the Association of Volunteer Bush Fire Brigades of WA Incorporated will be referred to as 'the Association' or AVBFB.

INTRODUCTION

To aid the Committee, the Association has chosen to respond against each of the 3 defined terms of reference for the inquiry which includes:

- 1. The implementation of recommendations flowing from inquiries and reviews of recent bushfires in WA.*
- 2. The funding of recommendations flowing from inquiries and reviews of recent bushfires in WA.*
- 3. The ongoing impact on victims of communities recently affected by bushfires.*

Under each of the 3 Terms of Reference, significant themes have been identified and comments have been provided to indicate the Associations:

- general attitude towards the issue/s;
- reasoning behind the comments; and, where possible,
- recommendations relating to the specific term of reference.

Where possible, reference has been made to relevant recommendations from inquiries and reviews of recent bushfires in WA, including:

- Community Development Justice Standing Committee report on the Inquiry into the States Preparedness for the 2011/2012 Bushfire Season (CDJSC Fire);
- Recommendations from the Major Incident Review into the Lake Clifton, Red Hill and Roleystone Fires – June 2011 (MIR);
- A Shared Responsibility – The report of the Perth Hills Bushfire February 2011 Review (PHB)
- Appreciating the Risk – Report of the Special Inquiry into the November 2011 Margaret River Bushfire (MRB)

- Community Development Justice Standing Committee report on the Toll of Trauma on WA Emergency Staff and Volunteers – September 2012 (CDJSC Trauma)
- Bellevue Hazardous Waste Fire Inquiry – 2001 (Bellevue)

These references will be shown as CDJSC Fire, MIR, PHB, MRB, CDJSC Trauma or Bellevue throughout the remainder of this document. Applicable Recommendations will also be referenced, where possible.

Terms of Reference 1: The implementation of recommendations flowing from inquiries and reviews of recent bushfires in WA.

➤ **KEELTY RECOMMENDATIONS** (also refer CDJSC Fire Recommendations 1, 5, 6, 8, 9, 12, 15, 18, 20, 21)

The Association agreed with Mr Mick Keelty's finding ('A Shared Responsibility – the report of the Perth Hills Bushfire February 2011 Review' and 'Appreciating the Risk – Report of the Special Inquiry into the November 2011 Margaret River Fires') that historically there has been a lack of focus on bushfire mitigation by Federal/State Government agencies and local governments. The Association committed to supporting the implementation of the Keelty recommendations, which were endorsed by the WA Government, and volunteers have contributed time, knowledge and expertise over the past 12 – 18 months to ensure the resulting strategies were sound. Unfortunately these efforts have been stalled by indecision from Government.

The Association has made numerous attempts to communicate the concerns of the Volunteer Emergency Response personnel since the Keelty review commenced. This has included correspondence submitted directly to the Premier, The Department of Premier and Cabinet and the Emergency Services Minister.

The Association has been disappointed that their legitimate contributions for ensuring a 'best practice' approach to bushfire risk reduction have been largely disregarded and are questioning whether their input into the Government 'Keelty' Working Groups has been a token to allow Government to say that have consulted rather than a genuine attempt to engage in meaningful consultation with a view to achieving the best possible outcome for the WA Community.

The Volunteers are left questioning whether there is any real benefit to be gained by supporting similar working groups in the future as there is the perceived risk that such involvement only serves to give the community the 'inference' that the Volunteers are supportive of the Governments approach to addressing identified gaps including, but not limited to, bushfire risk reduction, resourcing, training and volunteerism itself. There have been many instances where the Government has taken action, or attempted to take action, that has not been supported by the Volunteer Membership. Whether this is deliberate or an oversight is unknown which questions the commitment to real and meaningful consultation.

There has been Volunteer representation on each of the five established Keelty (Department of Premier and Cabinet) Working Groups and it is the view of the participating members that whilst a number of the straightforward and inexpensive actions have been addressed, the big ticket items that will make a significant difference to the WA Community have been largely placed on hold or disregarded.

The following identifies some of the concerns of the Association regarding the implementation of recommendations flowing from inquiries and reviews of recent bushfires in WA. Please note that not all of the associated report's recommendations have been reflected and this does not indicate that the omitted recommendations have been addressed to the satisfaction of the Volunteer Community.

1) PHB Recommendation 2 – Emergency Services Act Review

The Association has the following significant concerns regarding the review of the Emergency Services Act and other related legislation being proposed:

- a) Recommendations over the years that have advocated changes to, and amalgamation of, the legislation, have primarily come from government agencies who have created the perception that things are not working, when in fact the agencies themselves have been the cause of, and have generated, this perception to enable change that takes control away from community in favour of a centralised command and control model. This centralised command and control model, and the subsequent disempowerment of communities and volunteers, is not supported.
 - b) Safeguards for volunteers, particularly relating to 'acts undertaken in good faith' have the potential to be overlooked or watered down, thereby increasing risk to Emergency Services Volunteers who are also members of the WA Community. Legislation should be in place that is water tight against potential legal challenges and should include funding of legal expenses for any volunteers who find themselves in the unfortunate position of being challenged or subpoenaed to give evidence etc. Legislation should provide incontrovertible support to volunteers regardless of the circumstance. Legislation must cover immediate financial assistance (to ensure there are no delays) and any out-of-pocket expenses that volunteers incur to get themselves to treatment or result from family commitments and activities that would normally be undertaken by that volunteer. To not support this position is another cause of people not wanting to volunteer.
 - c) The Government's decision to restructure the Fire and Emergency Services Authority whilst undertaking significant legislative reform in the Emergency Services context has resulted in chaos (lack of clear direction, removal of services and functions that were designed to support volunteers, lack of leadership, disruption to communication, lack of consultation and intimidation to meet unrealistic deadlines set by political agendas).
 - d) There has been a lack of meaningful consultation with key stakeholders, particularly the Emergency Services Volunteers, in the review of the Emergency Services Act and other associated Legislation. The limited consultation and the restriction imposed by government (regarding timeframes etc) have not supported a considered response by Volunteers. Deadlines for feedback are often restrictive and unreasonable when taking into consideration the circumstances associated with Volunteerism, particularly in the Emergency Services Context where the volunteer base is large and spread across the State.
- 2) CDJSC Fire Recommendation 3 – 'that the Minister for Emergency Services institute a thorough review of the operations of FESAwith a primary focus on staffing levels, equipment levels and coordination and training needs'.**

Staffing levels within all agencies are inadequate to ensure a consistent standard of service to either the Community or Emergency Services Volunteers. This is putting the Community of WA at risk.

There are insufficient funds to ensure that all Volunteer Brigades, Groups and Units have the appropriate resources and equipment to enable them to respond to incident in the community in an effective, efficient, timely and safe manner. In the past weeks the Association has become aware of one Unit that is still operating from a facility that is considered 'worse than a tin shed' with another unit unable to provide any Personal Protective Equipment to any of their 25+ registered members. Such examples are unacceptable. Attempts by the units to have their needs addressed have seemingly fallen on deaf ears. This is putting the Community of WA at risk.

Operations within FESA need to be better coordinated to actively encourage participation by Emergency Services Volunteers in all aspects of FESA business. This also means that FESA activities need to be scheduled to reflect the needs of volunteers and sufficient lead time incorporated to support volunteers being released from their day to day employment.

Training for all Emergency Services personnel needs to be better resourced and managed to ensure training is:

- Timely
- Available
- Flexible
- Relevant
- Consistent
- Safe
- Coordinated
- Recorded

This lack of resourcing for critical functions and services is putting the Community of WA at risk.

Incentives in the context of the reservist system used in the army needs to be explored. Volunteers generally are not seeking payment, however Government needs to take steps to ensure Volunteers are not financially worse off when taking time off for training or to support Community education activities.

3) PHB Recommendation 4 – Bushfire Protection Guidelines

Considerable work is still required to progress this recommendation. There has been limited consultation with Emergency Services Volunteers, who are also community members and therefore best placed to comment from the community perspective.

4) PHB Recommendation 6 & 10 – Bushfire Education

The Association believes that opportunities are not being taken advantage of to ensure the message of 'shared responsibility' is communicated effectively to the community and that ongoing timely reminders are made. As an example, the week of 21 October is Bushfire Action Week, yet there has been limited information shared through the media regarding this critical message. The Ministerial Statement released on 21 October mentioned that it was Bushfire Action Week though the content focused primarily on the acquisition of the Erickson Airplane rather than the messages of 'Shared Responsibility'.

At a recent primary school assembly, in an area that has been subject to fires in the recent past, the fact that it was 'National Water Week' (which also commences on the week of 21 Oct) was mentioned yet there was nothing about 'Bushfire Action Week' and how as students, parents and teachers, they can contribute to a safer community. This assembly was attended by over 400 community members and is one example of an opportunity lost. Every opportunity should be taken to communicate these critical messages.

The communication from FESA regarding the 2012 Bushfire Action Week was circulated to the relevant Emergency Services Volunteer Brigades/Groups and Units on Friday 19th of October 2012, 3 days before the week commenced. These unrealistic timeframes did not support the involvement of Emergency Services Volunteers in Community Activities and therefore this communication was largely a wasted effort.

The Associations strongly believe that it is recommendations such as **PHB Recommendations 6 & 10** that will have an impact upon the "cultural change" needed for the community to adopt a true 'shared responsibility' approach.

Communities need to be empowered to build reliance, yet the removal of control from the local level (ie the HMA status being moved to centralised control) gives other agencies and volunteers an excuse not to be involved as it's not their problem anymore. This builds community reliance which increases pressure on all levels of government expenditure and resource requirements which generally are not sustainable in the longer term.

'Shared responsibility' means empowering communities not disempowering them. Therefore considerable effort and resources should be directed towards education, building resilience, empowering volunteers and community, partnerships, prevention, preparedness, response and recovery.

5) PHB Recommendation 7 & 49 – Community involvement in pre-season exercising

The Association has not received any evidence that this recommendation has been progressed. Furthermore, there has been limited involvement of Emergency Services Volunteers in pre-season exercising despite numerous requests to the Fire and Emergency Services Authority to ensure that volunteer involvement was considered, encouraged and supported. Exercises continue to be scheduled during business hours Monday to Friday when the majority of Volunteers are unable to attend due to work commitments and when Volunteers are invited, the short notice given often precludes Volunteer participation as Volunteers are unable to have attendance supported by their

employers.

In the recent FESA State Exercise (held 23 Oct 2012), those Volunteers who were able to participate at short notice, were placed in positions that were subservient to the Career Fire and Rescue personnel despite the Volunteer personnel having considerable skills and experience in Incident Management roles. This “rank based” approach has been a common theme and criticism for many years yet this unfortunate culture still prevails and in fact, appears to be getting worse and further entrenched.

The Associations strongly believe that it is recommendations such as **PHB Recommendations 7 & 49** that will have an impact upon the cultural change needed within FESA, for the community and volunteers to adopt a true ‘shared responsibility’ approach. Therefore considerable effort and resources should be directed towards rectifying these issues.

6) PHB Recommendation 13 & 14 – Comprehensive prescribed burn program (also refer MRB Recommendation 1, 2 & 4)

The Prescribed Burn program across the State is significantly behind schedule and is significantly under resourced, physically and financially. The announcement of the ban on Prescribed Burns ‘5 Km Exclusion Zone’ has further hampered efforts to meet the prescribed burn program targets. Whilst this ‘ban’ has now been lifted, the understandable heightened community concerns regarding prescribed burns (as a result of the Margaret River Fires) has resulted in even further delays and loss of another burning season, putting the already behind program, further behind.

This is placing the community at significant risk.

Further research is required into the identification of the most appropriate mitigation strategies for coastal vegetation and resources need to be allocated at the local level to achieve this.

7) PHB Recommendation 15 & 52 – CBFCO and CESM Training

The Association is not aware of any progress being made regarding the training and development of Chief Bush Fire Control Officers or Community Emergency Service Managers to better prepare them for the 2012/12 Bushfire Season.

Whilst FESA has indicated that they have developed a comprehensive Professional Development Pathway for all services, there has been limited information provided and limited progress made in the past 18 months regarding the implementation of these pathways. The information that has been shared by FESA to date has raised significant concerns for the Association as these ‘pathways’ will likely impose unrealistic demands upon the Volunteer members. The ‘pathways’ appear to be very prescriptive and restrictive with minimal, if any, flexibility to address individual member’s circumstances and unrealistic and unnecessary pre-requisite competencies have been included.

Indications are that the ‘pathways’ for CBFCO’s and CESM will impose a reporting/positional hierarchy that is not supported by the Association and is degrading to the rank and standing of the Bush Fire Service.

Limited consultation has occurred with the Volunteer members regarding these pathways and the consequences for volunteers.

There is also a move to devolve a lot of the responsibility for Volunteer Training to the Volunteers themselves due to the staffing and resourcing restrictions within FESA. This is unacceptable for the following reasons:

- Additional impost being placed upon Volunteers,
- Potential for reduced consistency in training,
- Risk to training quality due to reduced quality controls.

8) PHB Recommendation 24 – Lessons Learnt incorporated into Level 3 IMT training

The Association is not aware if this recommendation has been addressed as 'lessons learnt' have not been communicated to the Volunteers and there is no evidence that training has been amended to address any identified gaps.

As significant stakeholders within the community, selected senior Volunteer Emergency Services Personnel should be included in all Level 3 IMT training to ensure that consistent messages and quality support are offered to community members by all Emergency Services Personnel, whether Career or Volunteer, during and after an incident. All responders should be 'on the same page'.

This class and rank based system, that seems to be entrenched in the FESA structure, is degrading the worth and experience of many professional volunteers.

9) PHB Recommendation 35 – Radio Communications Capability

There are still significant gaps in the Radio Communications capability across the FESA Communications network. This is creating a significant risk to Emergency Services Personnel and the Community. These issues were raised after the Roleystone, Margaret River and Nannup fires with the new radio system being less effective in smoke, terrain moisture etc.

10) PHB Recommendation 46 – FESA Restructure

It is the view of the Association that the restructure of the Fire and Emergency Services Authority has come at a cost to the acceptance, understanding, integration, service and support to volunteers.

The agency is now significantly top heavy with limited lower level support personnel. This may have given the public the appearance of reducing the apparent bureaucratic 'suits' however increasing the number of senior level personnel without adding to the supporting administrative structure, has simply resulted in a large increase in bureaucratic 'uniforms' and a potential reduction in the support being provided to Volunteers. Further, with the reduction in administrative support, uniformed personnel are now being required to undertake large volumes of administrative work that would be more effectively and efficiently performed by skilled administrative staff. The community is now paying substantial salaries for uniformed 'administrators' whose skills and experience should be being applied to operational demands.

The Associations have recently become aware in one area of FESA alone, that 2 of 7 administrative positions (28.5% of the current administrative capacity) will be lost in the coming weeks as a direct result of the recent Premiers 'Public Sector Efficiency Dividends and Staff Freeze' announcements. This area has already lost administrative support due to the FESA restructure as funds were redirected to support the creation of additional senior uniformed positions. The 5 remaining administrative positions are now required to support 45+ unit staff including 16+ senior managers and undertake the work generated by 1123 Fire fighters, 290 staff members and a few thousand volunteers. This is well over a ratio of 1 Administrative position to support over 1000 stakeholders. It is decisions such as this that has directly impacted upon services to Volunteers.

This also applies to local governments who support, manage and are responsible for the state's largest fire fighting force, 80 plus %. This should not be seen as an opportunity to disempower the community and volunteers by imposing the city centric models of management. This will not be supported. It should be seen as an opportunity to ensure that more funding support is given to the local level to build community resilience by supporting volunteerism.

Other structural changes that have significantly impacted upon the volunteers include:

- **Removal of the Stakeholder Relations positions** – these positions were critical to ensure an appropriate conduit between Local Government, DEC, FESA management and volunteers. These positions ensured that volunteer's issues were addressed in a timely manner, that issues did not escalate unnecessarily, volunteers were considered in strategic planning, volunteers skills and experience were utilised to the benefit of the industry and community, that the inherent needs of volunteers (timeframes, timings, scheduling etc) were understood and addressed and that volunteers were integrated into FESA activities where possible.

These positions should be reinstated for all services as a matter of priority.

- **Reduction of the Bushfire Mitigation unit**

The Associations concerns have been detailed elsewhere in this submission.

- **Career Fire and Rescue personnel occupying a significant majority of senior operational and non operational positions** – this has resulted in significant decisions being made by Career Fire and Rescue personnel who have limited understanding of the needs of volunteers and limited understanding of bushfire and natural hazards.

11) PHB Recommendation 48 – ESL Management

The Associations support the move of the management and administration away from FESA who is a major direct beneficiary of the levy. There is concern that the current arrangement may be being used to influence on ground decision making.

➤ CDJSC REPORTS

The CDJSC report in to Perth Readiness for the 2011–2012 Bushfire Season included a number of recommendations that the Associations believe are still outstanding and require immediate attention including:

- **CDJSC Fire Recommendation 3 – ‘that the Minister for Emergency Services institute a thorough review of the operations of FESAwith a primary focus on staffing levels, equipment levels and coordination and training needs’.**

The Association’s response to this recommendation has been addressed elsewhere in this submission.

- **CDJSC Fire Recommendation 12 – ‘that the Minister.....ensure that the annual budget of FESA contains the funds it requires to coordinate an annual mutli-agency bushfire field exercise alongside other desktop exercises....’.**

The Association’s response to this recommendation has been addressed elsewhere in this submission.

- **CDJSC Fire Recommendation 13 – ‘that the annual budgets of FESA and WA Police are sufficient to bring forward the complete dates of the current radio project now underway’**

Radio communications are still a major issue during incidents and this possess a significant risk to both members of the community and emergency responders.

- **CDJSC Fire Recommendation 16 – ‘that the Minister for Emergency Services and the Minister for Local Government review and report on ways in which the States volunteer firefighters and rescue workers can be more effectively managed and valued’;**

The Association has not seen any reports related to this recommendation. Whilst it is noted that some Local Governments, and in some cases FESA, have made moves to address this, concern is expressed that any real advances have not been made regarding improvements to the effective management and valuing of volunteers. Some examples include:

- **Insurance coverage for Volunteers** - Significant concerns have recently come to light regarding the safeguarding of the health and welfare of Emergency Services Volunteers. Whilst it is acknowledged that Volunteers are covered by Insurance, this may take significant time to come into effect, with the injured Volunteer having to ‘fend for themselves’ in the interim. This can significantly impact the livelihood of our volunteers and their families with some recent instances resulting in loss of employment and loss of business. This situation also has the potential to negatively affect the recruitment and retention of Volunteers.

This issue should be addressed as a matter of urgency.

- **Reluctance to acknowledge and accept the skills, knowledge and experience of Volunteers** – As previously indicated, there continues to be reluctance from FESA personnel to accept the skills, knowledge and experience of Volunteers. Inflexible and onerous skills recognition processes are generally the fall back position when recognition of the competencies of volunteers is requested. Limited, if any, opportunities are made available for Volunteer personnel to be included in major roles within Incident Management Teams and in all circumstances, FESA personnel continue to allocate roles to volunteers that are subservient to the roles being undertaken by FESA personnel who are, in the majority of cases, Career Fire and Rescue staff who may or may not have experience with actual Bushfire incidents.
- **Legislation changes that occurred with the Emergency Services Act resulted the ‘good faith clause’ being removed from the *Bushfires Act 1954*** – As a result of changes to Emergency Services related legislation, there are increased concerns by Volunteers that they may no longer be adequately covered by the clause under the Emergency Services Act as it may only be applied during a declared emergency rather than covering all Volunteer Emergency Responders for all the activities they undertake in relation to their volunteer role.

This should be reviewed as a matter of urgency and reinstated under the Bush Fires Act and any other Acts that cover Emergency Services volunteers.

- **Failure to recognise the unique needs of volunteers** – there have been increasing examples of unrealistic timeframes and deadlines being set that preclude appropriate and effective consultation taking place with volunteers. It is standard practice for government and departmental meetings, forums, working groups, committees etc to be scheduled, at short notice and during normal business hours on week days necessitating the constant travel by regional volunteers to the Metro area and significantly impacting on volunteers employment. There have been limited instances where full time paid FESA employees actually travel to regional locations (or to the Volunteers) to hold meetings etc to aid Volunteer participation.

This matter should be addressed as a matter of urgency.

- **Removal of support services to Emergency Services Volunteers** – as previously discussed, the removal of key support positions within all agencies structures has had significant impact upon the service provided to Volunteers.
- **Failure by Government to support the inclusion of Volunteer Firefighters and other Volunteer Emergency Responders in the proposed *Workers’ Compensation and Injury Management (Fair Protection for Firefighters) Amendment Bill 2012***. – Volunteer Firefighters are exposed to the same range of hazards experienced by Career Fire and Rescue personnel. In many cases, this threat is more prolonged and more severe due to the nature of bushfires and the different level of Personal Protective Equipment accessible by Volunteers. Due to the ‘all hazards’ nature of the emergency environment, this same threat exists for all emergency volunteers including State Emergency Service Volunteers as all may be involved in Fire Response.

The position of Government demonstrates direct opposition to the CDJSC Fire Recommendation 16 and this position must be reviewed immediately.

We highlight the findings of the 2001 Bellevue relevant to volunteers that still pose us great concern:

Finding 2 Bellevue

The Committee finds there exists a low probability of medium to long term serious or chronic health effects to the fire-fighters and residents exposed to the fire or plume. The Committee recommends that the Health Department of Western Australia develops, implements and maintains a medical register of individuals who were exposed to the effects of the fire emergency. The register needs to:

- *contain evidence of exposure to the effects of the fire emergency; and*
- *include any pre and post-incident exposure to potentially hazardous materials.*

Finding 28 – p.64

The Fire and Emergency Services Authority incident controllers did not accurately communicate the nature of the fire smoke plume to Bushfire Brigades called to assist in the incident and this was due in part to the failure to accurately classify the incident as a chemical fire.

Finding 32– p.71

There were serious technical and system problems with communication and communication systems that hampered coordination between the Hazardous Emergency Advisory Team, the Incident Controller, volunteer firefighters and other regulatory agencies.

- **CDJSC Fire Recommendation 17 – ‘that the Minister for Emergency Services and the Minister for Environment develop a Volunteer Charter that recognises the important work undertaken by the States volunteer bushfire and emergency services personnel’.**

The Association is not aware of progress made to the development of a Volunteer Charter. The Associations support the development and adoption of a charter to include all Emergency Services personnel.

The Association also supports the development of a ‘Volunteers Act’ to ensure protection for all volunteers throughout Western Australia for all acts or deed undertaken in good faith not to mention the “Good Samaritan” acts of good faith.

- **CDJSC Fire Recommendation 18 – ‘that the Minister.....provide additional resources to FESA, DEC and WALGA.... to improve the community’s knowledge of bushfire safety and to allow these agencies to involve the public in their exercises’.**

This recommendation has been discussed earlier in this submission.

➤ **TECHNOLOGY AND BEST PRACTICE METHODOLOGY**

Lack of current up to date and effective technology to enhance operations on the ground needs investigation. Real time information sharing across all agencies, including support agencies, also needs to be addressed.

➤ **RESOURCING**

Whilst much has been said through Premier and Ministerial Media Releases about increased resources in areas such as the ‘Capes’ Region, there is evidence to suggest that these increased resources are in fact ‘reallocated resources’ which has resulted in the reduction of staff in other areas and delays in resource allocations to other areas.

As indicated throughout this submission, the issue of effective resourcing for Emergency Services operations and administration should be reviewed as a matter of urgency.

It is the view of the Associations that the Department of Fire and Emergency Services and the Department of Environment and Conservation should be exempt from the Public Service Efficiency Dividends and ‘staffing freezes’ and that the Government should honour the commitments already given for additional funds and staff to ensure all recommendations to enhance the States Bushfire preparedness are allocated to the DFES and DEC and Local Government as a matter of priority and urgency. Failure to do so will place the WA Community as significant risk.

➤ **IMPACT OF 2012 CHANGES**

The impact of reviews and changes to the Emergency Services environment during 2012 have been significant including:

- Change to the Executive at the Fire and Emergency Services Authority
- Restructuring of FESA
- Relocation of FESA
- Amendments to the Emergency Services Act
- Amendments to the FES Act
- Review of the Health and Safety Legislation

This volume of activities and change and the speed by which this has been undertaken has had significant consequences across the Emergency Services sector. The fact that the changes have been perceived as being imposed rather than implemented with a consultative and collaborative approach has been detrimental. The consequences include:

- Lack of clear direction

- Insecurity
- Resistance
- Functions being unallocated or not being clearly allocated thereby resulting in no-one taking ownership
- Reduced service to volunteers
- Erosion of relationships between FESA personnel and volunteers
- Increased risk to volunteers and the community

The Association believes that the Government has been so focused on making legislative changes designed to take control away from communities (disempowering them and making them reliant/subservient) that it has not provided sufficient time for analysis of the consequences of these changes and the longer term issues that may arise.

The Association's view is that there will be consequences that will create further risk to the Emergency Services Volunteers, the Community of WA or both.

The Association does not support or believe that the centralised model is conducive to volunteerism or the future of Emergency Management and Emergency Response. We reiterate that FESA was established to bring the administrative arms of agencies together and that on the ground activities would not be affected. We now see an organisation evolving that is focused on centralised control and command rather than providing support and advice.

Despite announcements to the contrary by the Environment Minister and more recently the FESA CEO, there is limited evidence on the 'front line' of any improvements to policy, procedures, resourcing, safety, equipment or support.

It is acknowledged that a number of plans have been developed at a strategic level however many of these are yet to be resourced and implemented.

➤ **INTERAGENCY MITIGATION**

The Association acknowledges that it is a government priority to endeavour to safeguard West Australian communities against bushfires and that it has made a commitment to the public to prevent a recurrence of the devastation caused by the Margaret River bushfires. The current lack of coordination between various agencies due to a lack of funding and resourcing including the restrictions placed on mitigation, is negating the government's good intent and placing communities at risk.

A lack of cohesion and communication between government agencies has created restrictive impediments, the consequence being that the risk of a devastating bush fire, on the scale of Margaret River, has been exacerbated rather than reduced.

Terms of Reference 2: The funding of recommendations flowing from inquiries and reviews of recent bushfires in WA.

➤ **BUSHFIRE MITIGATION**

The Association has become increasingly frustrated at the lack of progress being made to implement the solutions to inquiry recommendations focused on reducing fuel loads across the State and ensuring protection buffers for communities.

There has been an adhoc approach to mitigation to date, which has to cease, and a more strategic risk management approach needs to be taken. This can only occur with appropriate resourcing to ensure effective implementation.

It is the Emergency Services Volunteers, and we believe the community's, expectation that bushfire risk mitigation is adequately funded and resourced across all agencies and all areas of the State. To achieve this, the States' approach to bushfire mitigation must include:

- delivery by trained local community staff who are experienced and competent in bushfire risk assessment and mitigation;
- a 'tenure-blind' approach to risk management planning;
- appropriate resourcing;
- appropriate funding; and
- compliance across all land owners including the crown.

We have worked with Government to determine a 'best practice' solution to Fuel Load Reduction however budgetary constraints are getting in the way of implementing this. Significant efforts have been made to clearly identify what is required however the WA Government has not committed the funds necessary to ensure that these identified 'best practice' strategies become reality.

It is unacceptable for any resulting bushfire mitigation strategy to place additional impost on Emergency Services Volunteers or take advantage of the altruistic nature of our volunteers. There have been recent attempts to place this additional impost on Volunteers. The volunteers certainly have a significant role to play including having their concerns on any risk heard and acted upon, however the actual tasks of identification of risk, development of programs to treat the risk and the actual work to reduce that risk should be undertaken by persons employed to do so.

The FESA Bushfire Mitigation Unit has afforded support to volunteers and local governments to assist in the planning and preparation of prescribed burns. This program has provided significant advancements to improving safety for communities across WA. The Bushfire Mitigation program needs to be continued under a "shared responsibility" model and further developed to ensure there are avenues to allow experienced volunteers to contribute and to support local governments in their obligations for training, mitigation and response.

This requirement is even more imperative with the proposed extension of the gazetted fire districts that are encompassing significant areas of bush and the expectation that fires in these areas are to be managed by Fire and Rescue, who at this stage have little experience in managing significant bushfires.

The line on the map extensions to gazetted fire districts needs to be reconsidered in line with a service delivery model that best serves the community and has an approach that embraces community resilience at the local level. The blanket approach announced by the Premier that wipes volunteer's districts off the map without any consultation crushes volunteerism and takes away community resilience.

Local knowledge is essential to planning effective hazard reduction burns, the majority of which are undertaken by local brigades and approved by the Local Government Chief Bush Fire Control Officers. A significant amount of resources will need to be allocated to the new Office of BushFire Risk Management (OBRM) to ensure the hazard reduction programs (State and Local Government) are not held up due to the added layer of bureaucracy.

Presently, no funds have been directed towards on ground mitigation or resources to undertake critical mitigation activities.

Terms of Reference 3: The ongoing impact on victims of communities recently affected by bushfires.

The Association's response to this is in the context of Volunteers and makes reference to the recent September 2012 report into trauma on volunteer and career emergency services personnel.

As Volunteer Associations represent over 90% of the state's emergency services resources, we challenge the comments made by the united fire fighters union regarding 'volunteers not receiving the same training as career firefighters'. The reason for Volunteers not receiving comparable training is that the union controlled FESA organisation doesn't recognise nor understand volunteerism and as a consequence resources and Emergency Services Levy funding is focused on the career membership that provides less than 10% of the state's fire fighters. We believe that staff wages should not be coming out of the Emergency Services Levy, this should be coming out of treasury and the administration of the Emergency Services Levy should be undertaken by an independent body that is not the major beneficiary of the funding and that there should be a level playing field for beneficiaries of the scheme.

Our Association will not support, without the agreement of the Volunteers, any moves by the State to change the current structures of the Bush Fire or any other service, with the exception of changes (supported through extra funding and resources) that are designed to reduce stress and fatigue on the volunteers.

We are disappointed that the CDJSC did not invite the biggest and most cost effective resource to the table to discuss its concerns about these matters and point out that table 4.1 (in the CDJSC Trauma report) is misleading as 28000 of the volunteers quoted as "FESA" are in fact "Local Government" and the records should be corrected.

The Association supports **CDJSC Trauma Recommendation 21** as outlined below;

CDJSC Trauma Recommendation 21 Page 112

The Minister for Emergency Services ensure that the Fire and Emergency Services Authority's peer support program is rejuvenated as soon as possible with increased funding to provide added training for staff volunteering for this program.

QUESTIONS:

The Associations have questions that are of concern:

- 1) What risk does the recent Premier's announcement pose regarding the reduction in Government Department spending and the moratorium on Government staffing, particularly given that many commitments have already been made in accepting the Keelty report recommendations? Will these commitments still be honoured and solutions resourced appropriately?**
- 2) How is the government going to address the back log of several years of outstanding Prescribed Burns?**
- 3) What extra funding and resources will be allocated to address the back log and mitigation works?**
- 4) Are there sufficient strategic water supplies and bulk water tankers available around the State to cater for the extra dry winters we have been experiencing?**
- 5) Whilst there has been much said about apparent increases in funding to both DEC and FESA as a direct result of recommendations from inquiries and reviews, there is limited evidence of this on the 'ground'. How much money has been allocated to respond to these recommendations and where has this money been spent e.g. Hazard Reduction?**

IN SUMMARY

- The Government's decision to restructure FESA whilst undertaking legislative change has caused chaos over the past 18 months
- There is a lack of a clear communicated direction within the Emergency Services industry
- FESA has successfully manoeuvred to assume Command and Control in response to incidents however have, or are attempting to, relinquish responsibility in relation to Prevention, Preparedness and Recovery without being open and honest. It is noted that they are only interested in getting control and command over what is funded by ESL
- Working groups have not been given sufficient time to consult, research and analyse to ensure solutions are appropriate and changes are implemented effectively and efficiently
- Responses have been very 'metro centric' (with the exception of the Capes project) – for example: Solutions designed to address issues resulting from Roleystone Fires have been addressed from a 'whole of State' perspective even though many of these solutions will not work outside the Perth Metro area
- Some proposed changes will negatively impact upon volunteering within the Emergency Services industry and the Government is risking a significant reduction in volunteers
- The committees are attempting a 'one size fits all' approach' which will not work as no two incidents are the same and cannot be fought the same way

- High risk areas will change from year to year dependent upon weather conditions, controlled burns and any number of other factors
- FESA has not taken advantage of available and emerging technology to aid in the prevention of, preparation for, response to and recovery from incidents
- Most, if not all, of the solutions already implemented have impacted upon resourcing and services elsewhere – ie 'robbed Peter to pay Paul'
- All bushfire regulations and requirements should bind the Crown
- All agencies, including FESA, DEC and Local Governments, should be appropriately resourced (including funding, equipment and staffing) to enable them to fulfil their statutory and social obligations. Current funding is significantly inadequate
- The new DFES Structure is too top heavy

The Association is of the belief that limited changes have been made regarding the States' Preparedness level and that the WA Community is no better prepared for the fast approaching 2012/13 Bushfire Season than it was the same time last year.

The upcoming 'fire season' is expected to be more arduous than 2011/12 season, therefore it is the Associations view that implementing anything less than what has been recommended through the many previous reviews, inquiries, post incident analysis etc including the Keelty Report and the 2011/2012 CDJSC Report, poses significant and unacceptable risk to the community of WA. The Associations also believe that the community of Western Australia would expect, following the major bushfires and enquiries, that real improvements to community safety are made.



Terry Hunter ASFM
President
AVBFB