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Submission To The Community Development and Justice Standing Committee

Enquiry Into the State's Preparedness For the 2012/13 Fire Season

Hearing Date: 7th November 2012

Introduction:

The United Firefighters Union of Australia - West Australian Branch is represented today by me- Kevin Jolly, Branch Secretary; Frank Martinelli, Branch President and Lea Anderson, Branch Assistant Secretary.

Frank Martinelli and I have between us over 68 years of experience as both volunteer and professional firefighters. We both grew up in regional WA and we are both qualified professional Station Officers as designated by rank within the WA Fire and Rescue Service.

Our Union represents professional firefighters and the majority of our members come from a Fire and Rescue background, a minority of our members are professional firefighters from a Bush Fire Brigade background. From reading FESA's final annual report you will see that our members attend and deal with just over 80% of the State's fire incidents. This statistic is important because the validity of what we say is not based on how big we are or how many people we have on our books or how much of the State's land is vested in our care - what counts is that our members are there, attending 80% of WA's fire incidents.

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From reading some of the submissions put to you by other organisations, it is interesting to observe that there is a "myth" that exists with regard to which personnel understands, manages or has "the knowledge" of bush firefighting in WA.

As Frank's and my career attest, it must be noted that professional Fire and Rescue Firefighters and Officers do have extensive bushfire, wild fire and grass fire experience - you only have to examine the occurrence books of our Fire Stations and to review the statistics collected annually (from the Fire Incident Reporting System - FIRS) to determine this.

The Union does not criticise or detract from the fire mitigation practice and knowledge that DEC personnel have and neither is the Union 'anti-volunteer', volunteers work alongside professional firefighters and officers at many incidents and are often the only resource in the less populated parts of our State. When fires across WA are significant or catastrophic and threaten life and property, it doesn't matter where they start or which agency or brigade has had control of them, if they escalate to a stage where they cannot be managed locally then professional resources are deployed to take control within a disciplined, rank structured chain of command led by our Senior Officers and service.

In the last 12 months the Union has seen many improvements under the leadership of the new Commissioner Wayne Gregson, Deputy Commissioner Lloyd Bailey and senior officers from the Fire and Rescue ranks. In preparation for this submission the Union reviewed the detail of the information we put to your Committee last year.

Report Card:

Following the catastrophic Kelmscott Roleystone, Margaret River, Lake Clifton, Red Hill and Toodyay fires the Union reviewed training, infrastructure and support for the provision of the best fire and emergency services for all WA citizens and communities.

2011: *With a Report Card Analysis in Blue Italics under each point.*

Short Term: (Immediate)

1. No decommissioning of appliances, skill sets or stations.

Whilst the record of decommissioning has improved significantly, there has been occasional de-commissioning of specialist appliances like the Incident Command Vehicle and the aerial appliances. These are integral parts of our service delivery and we should not have to patch up inadequate equipment and trucks.

2. Immediate access to Local Government Fire Resources and VFRS resources, including bulldozers and earth moving equipment.

This has yet to be tested in the forthcoming fire season. A central register of such equipment across all regions should be available to the Communications Centre and State Hazards Operations Officer.

3. Career personnel to be called in off-shift to staff the equipment outlined above on days that are designated "extreme and catastrophic.

This has yet to be tested and there appears to have been enormous pressure on senior officers to reduce over time in other areas, this proposal needs to be planned and resourced without fear of accusations of wastefulness - and has to be designed around risk.

4. Any training and staffing changes to be implemented that are necessary to give practical effect to the points 1-3 to be prepared and delivered immediately.

Immediate changes to mobilising for Category Zone 2 areas- (i.e. for high fuel load or known fire prone areas).

There appears to have been enormous pressure on the Forrestfield Training Centre and Operations to reduce overtime, when most of this training would occur given the number of staff required for operational service delivery. This means that in practical terms, very few Station Officers have had access to Level 2 Incident Control / Operations training. This lack of prioritisation for operational training is not acceptable.

The changes for mobilising to the Category Zone 2 areas should be mandated and this has yet to occur so that there are at a minimum- 2 professional career stations plus a career 2:4 tanker turned out to these high risk fire prone areas - for example in the metropolitan foot hills.

Medium Term: (12 months to 2 years) i.e. this should have started now.

5. 13 medium tankers - 8 to be allocated to fringe stations in the Metropolitan area: Butler, Ellenbrook, Midland, Welshpool, Wangara, Armadale and Rockingham. And 1 to Mandurah and 1 each to the country professional stations - Bunbury, Albany, Geraldton and Kalgoorlie.

Kalgoorlie has an old 2:4 tanker to supplement water supplies. This is not suitable for the city's growing needs and it is an outdated response for Kalgoorlie as well as other areas. Kalgoorlie Fire Station has requested a 7,000 litre tanker which should be a standard for all country professional stations.

It appears that Ellenbrook, Hope Valley and Maddington Fire Stations will receive additional resources this summer. But our communities are still in need of urgent additional Medium Tankers or 3:4s to supplement water supplies.

It appears that Bunbury's serious under resourcing will be addressed in part by the existing station doubling in capacity as a result of the failure of the Australind Fire Station to be built according to schedule. There is still a need for the Medium Tankers (3:4s) to be in place given the fuel load surrounding the City of Bunbury and the expansion of the Urban Rural interface.

6. 8 additional light tankers.

To date we believe that additional light tankers are scheduled for the following Stations: Butler, Ellenbrook, Midland, Welshpool, Armadale and Rockingham.

The staffing for these additional resources has been dependant on extra personnel and we are concerned that on extreme fire danger days that the staffing profiles need to be increased and then maintained at the higher level.

7. Additional 2 Pump Stations to be commissioned at Kiara, Rockingham and Joondalup.

This target has not been met. Kiara Fire Station is currently under construction. Joondalup Fire Station has been renovated but there has been no commitment to accommodate a second pump and crew. There has been no change at Rockingham Fire Station.

8. Every second pump to be converted to a Heavy Rescue pump across the State.

This has been achieved on existing two pump stations and needs to be monitored so that where additional second pumps are established this model flows on.

9. The construction of a burn building at the Forrestfield Training Centre.

The burn building has not been constructed. Training for professional and volunteer firefighters using a burn building gives crews much needed training and experience to develop skills under simulated high intensity burn conditions.

Again, the Forrestfield Training Centre is the subject of an expensive review with no significant improvement or expansion of actual facilities - this has been a disgrace for nearly a decade.

Long Term: (2 years and beyond) i.e. starting in 2013

10. *(Additional) 300 Firefighters + 75 Station Officers + 15 District Officers * Other senior officer positions will be addressed as a result of the proposed re-structure triggered by FESA becoming a Department - i.e new Chief Commissioner position etc.*

The Union is gravely concerned that the State Government's freeze on employment will impact on the creation of new Firefighter and Officer positions. Front line service delivery needs to be expanded but we find ourselves fighting for the mere maintenance of such services.

The Union welcomes the promotion of more Station Officers, District Officers, Superintendents, Chief Superintendents and Assistant Chief Operations Officers, Deputy Commissioners and the new Chief Commissioner. However, the Union is concerned that the rank structure and classifications remain and are based on compulsory fire pre-requisite qualifications, competencies and experience.

Professional Firefighters and Officers are not the equivalent of broader emergency service providers like the SES who specialise in preparation and recovery , and there will be grave implications for our communities if the discipline of the rank structure and chain of command is watered down to wash out professional fire qualifications and career experience. Managers without the necessary pre-requisite competencies cannot run significant fires or rescue operations and our citizens in country WA should not be treated any differently to those people living in Perth. All of our regions should be run by senior officers from our rank structure and there needs to be more fire qualified personnel in the country regional areas.

11. *A second CBD station - with good access to the inner North/Eastern suburbs (Northbridge/Highgate area).*

There are no concrete plans for a second CBD station and we are chronically under resourced. There have been rumours about future funds for a much needed second CBD station.

12. A comprehensive review completed by 2013 which analyses all Fire Districts, response times, station placements and station numbers. Any stations that are due to be re-developed should not shift from their site (or areas very close to the original site) to prevent the shift of resources - v - the growth of resources problems recently experienced by the service.

The WA Fire and Rescue Service does not meet national or international standards for response times to incidents. Primarily this is because of Station placement. When considering the Productivity Commission Report, to compare "apples with apples" the Union constantly refers to the standard that is set internationally - 7 minutes from the receipt of a 000 call to arrival is considered the standard - the Union has frequently raised concerns about the proposed location of new stations in both metropolitan Perth and our Country cities.

13. The Forrestfield Training Centre should treble in size and capacity to accommodate all the training that is required by the service.

For the last 3 years the Union has been advised by FESA administrators that there are discussions underway about resuming additional adjacent land from another Government Department. The Centre was built by the Fire Brigades Board and it is expected in 2012 to accommodate the training needs of a range of fire and emergency services. The facilities are again being reviewed and there have been very few real improvements or extensions to core training amenities.

14. 10 additional aerial appliances - 3 with a capacity of over 30 metres and 7 with a capacity of between 15 - 20 metres. Placement should include all regional professional stations, Mandurah and the Northern Suburban corridor.

There has been a study of new aerial appliances and we still only have 2 operational aerial appliances for the whole of the State, with an older appliance the METZ TTL available(when it is working) to replace the frequently decommissioned two aerial appliances.

This is woefully inadequate when you observe the increase in multi storey buildings across the metropolitan areas and in Mandurah and our regional cities.

15. A minimum of 2 fireboats or appliances to be moored at high risk areas for use by the closest stations - training and resourcing required (using a similar model to USAR and swift water rescue in Qld.).

The Union was ridiculed from some quarters for adding fireboats to the list of resources required, however if you observe the spread of marinas and resources on our waterways we are gambling with lives and infrastructure not to provision to protect these areas.

Conclusion:

The Union is still concerned that too few of the additional resources allocated after the Keelty Reports, and following the experience of the catastrophic fires are going into direct or "front line" service delivery.

The Union values the opportunity to place our concerns about the inadequacies of our preparations for the forthcoming fire season and we look forward to being able to work constructively with senior officers and the Government to address the areas of concern.

There are some specific areas in 2012 that warrant further consideration:

- Communications - the poor technology carried on our trucks and the ongoing problems with radio and other communication systems in parts of metropolitan Perth and most of regional WA need to be addressed with significant injections of capital expenditure. The WAERN (WA Emergency Radio Network) is being rolled out and there are issues with the necessary number of components required for fail safe systems of communications - for example Fire appliances in Metropolitan Perth can carry up to 5 different hand held sets to operate various incompatible networks. It should be noted that by this fire season there was supposed to be an upgraded digital network to underpin radio communication systems. It is feared that budget cuts have delayed the provision of vital modern systems of communications. Fire appliances are carrying new but outdated Mobile Data Transmitters when new ipads or tough books could deliver all the necessary information and data more cheaply and efficiently - including directions, GPS, fire plans, and reticulation maps for structures.
- Safety - all Fire Vehicles need to be properly equipped and resourced. In the wake of the terrible recent tragedy in Albany, the Union calls for an immediate review of vehicle safety equipment and protection to offer the best facilities in the event of burn overs. FRS, VFRS, BFS, VES and DEC appliances all need protection and there have to be Standard Operational Procedures across and for all agencies and Brigades to ensure that all professional, volunteer and DEC personnel are protected to the highest possible standards.

- Training - the priority target group for the receipt of AIIIMs and Level 2 Incident Control training must be professional career personnel. Volunteer training must be conducted by Instructors drawn from the ranks of professional Firefighters and Officers to ensure consistency. The Union has suggested that a mobile training cadre is established from within career professional ranks to ensure that training is delivered at both the Forrestfield Training Centre and throughout WA.
- ESL - the history of the collection of the Levy and the use of Levy funds is complex. Other submissions to this Enquiry have sought to access the Levy's resources which are scarce and any changes to who administers the Levy, and any increase to the services it should fund would be completely unacceptable and untenable. Ratepayers and residents pay the levy to fund services to protect their property. Government crown land is part of the broader responsibility funded by all tax payers and as such any required funding comes from Government revenue. The Union supports broader increases in funding for service delivery but not at the expense of raiding the Levy funds.

Please contact Kevin Jolly, the Branch Secretary if you require any further information.