

Getting Beechworth fit to fire fight

Bruce Forrest Beechworth Rural Fire Brigade - Captain

Joined CFA in 1973

Captain since 2016

Lieutenant since 2006

Born & bred farming stock from Beechworth

Fought every major fire in the district since 1970

100% volunteer in service of the Beechworth community

20th **April 2020**

To:

Royal Commission into National
Natural Disaster Arrangements

Confidential



BEECHWORTH RURAL
FIRE BRIGADE

Data used in this presentation is pulled directly from the District 24 handbook. Omitted from the data are ski resorts (ie Falls Creek) & stations outside the general radius of Beechworth ie Corryong. Population data is as per Census 2016

Beechworth/Stanley is a fire anomaly in the state

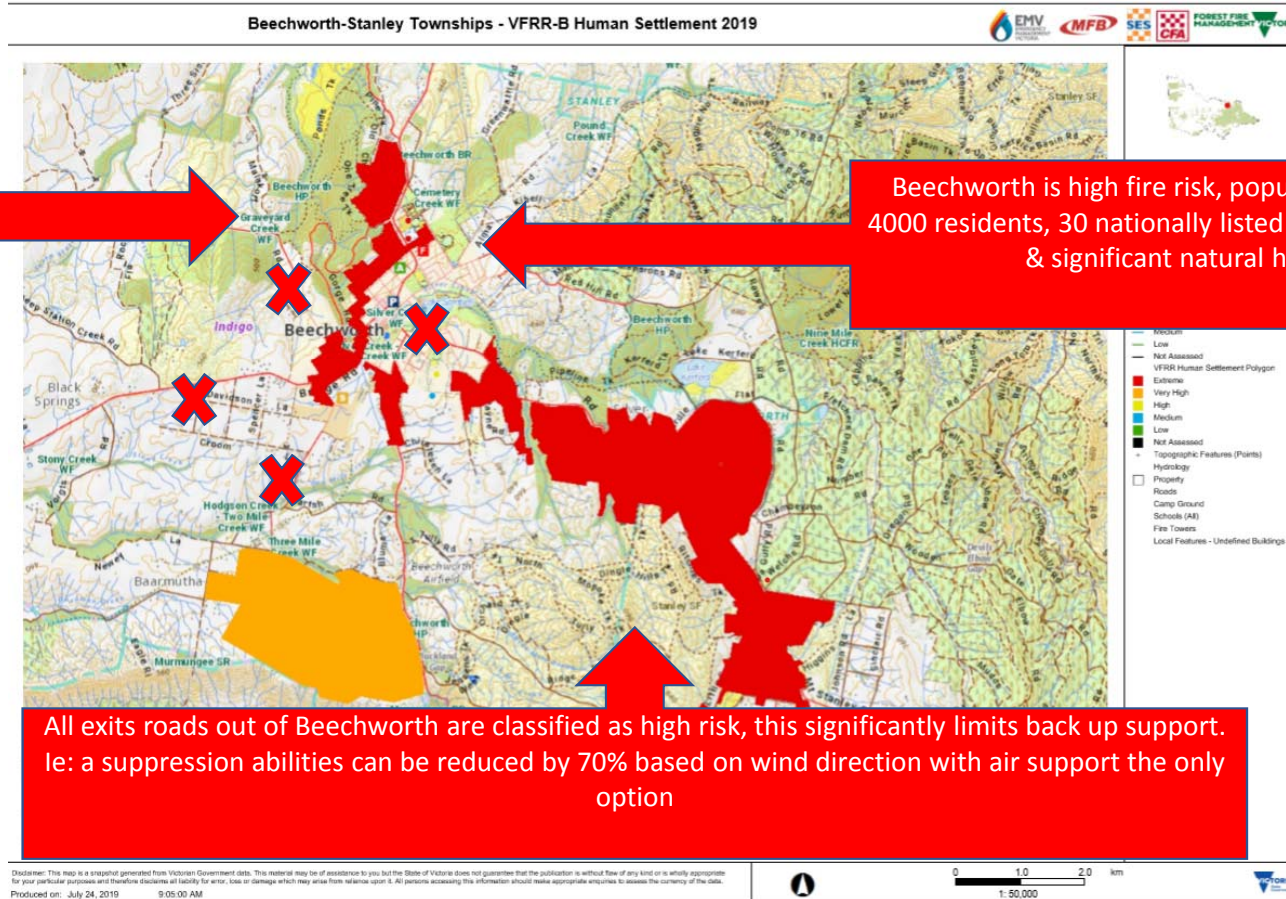
- Beechworth is perched on top of a hill, surrounded by high risk eucalypt and pine forests. The fact that 10 degrees of slope, can double the speed of the fire & parts of the local topography exceeding 40 degree slopes
- In the past 30 years Beechworth has been threatened by fires from the North, West & South. Highest risk is hot northerly winds fanning flames up thru the gorge causing the greatest risk to life, property & volunteers
- Beechworth is classified as extreme fire risk as per attached maps. All the exit roads are also classified as extreme risk
- Beechworth is the biggest town in District 24, has significant historical assets, with a population that swells to up to 20000 at key holiday periods
- Beechworth is the last station in the state to be amalgamated – timing mid 2021. Leaving 2 fire seasons
- FFMV has a depo in Beechworth but are often deployed around the state



Beechworth currently has NO appliance that can easily fight a wildfire from the Gorge. 50% of the town would be at risk & the potential of suppression abilities could potentially be reduced by up to 70%, making the town totally reliant on-air support



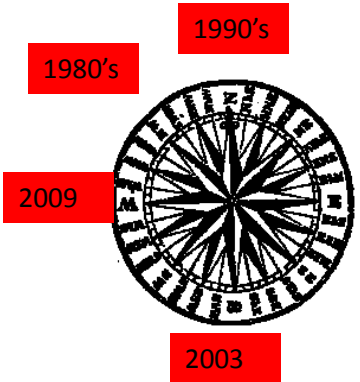
BEECHWORTH RURAL FIRE BRIGADE



CFA's do not have any appliance that can easily access the Gorge due to the bridge weight limits. The only vehicles available are volunteer owned vehicles.

Beechworth is high fire risk, population of close to 4000 residents, 30 nationally listed historical buildings & significant natural habitat

Multiple fire directions



All exits roads out of Beechworth are classified as high risk, this significantly limits back up support. I.e: a suppression abilities can be reduced by 70% based on wind direction with air support the only option

Beechworth ability to respond to a fire threat in fundamentally limited by our lack of appropriate fire fighting appliances



Why:

<p>Level of capability to fight a fire</p>	<p>Fire fighting Appliances</p>		<p>Beechworth CFA has 1 main appliance & 1 light tanker for bush fires. Urban has 1 main appliance. Both of the major appliances have been handed down from other brigades (average age of 10 years). The vehicles have very limited access to Beechworth most high risk areas.</p>
	<p>People Resource</p>		<p>Minimum of 50 trained and equipped fire fighters. The Brigade possesses 10 of the most experienced fire fighters in the state with over 3 major campaign under their belts</p>
	<p>Water access</p>		<p>Water access to lake Sambal which is in the center of town as well as Lake Kerford. High flow hydrants & water filling assets are also available throughout the town</p>
	<p>Non fire fighting infrastructure</p>		<p>Beechworth has a 5 year old station with capacity hold 3 times more fire appliances</p>

Beechworth is under resourced, has the wrong equipment which is putting the local community at risk

- The average fire fighting infrastructure \$/resident in district 24 is \$1634 – BEECHWORTH is 6 times less than this at \$276
- BEECHWORTH has 20% of the population of District 24, yet the town is allocated only 7% of the fire fighting appliances
- Barnawartha with a population of 904 yet it has a greater \$ value in appliances (\$1,150,000 vs \$1,065,000) at its disposal than a town with 3895
- 86% of stations have a slip on/ultra light ... BECCHWORTH is not one of them
- Currently reliant on 2 private vehicles to access key areas where CFA appliances cannot access – one of these vehicle is close to 40 years old
- We are putting our volunteers & their private resources at risk with the substandard equipment

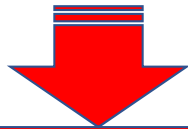


Even with the required investment in appliances Beechworth is less than a third of district 24 average



Current

- 3.4 Tanker (Hino) – 10+ years
- 1.5T Izuzu – 10+ Years
- Pumper Type 2 - 10+ years



Total Value: \$1,065,000
Cost /resident:\$276
% of District spend: 7%

Required

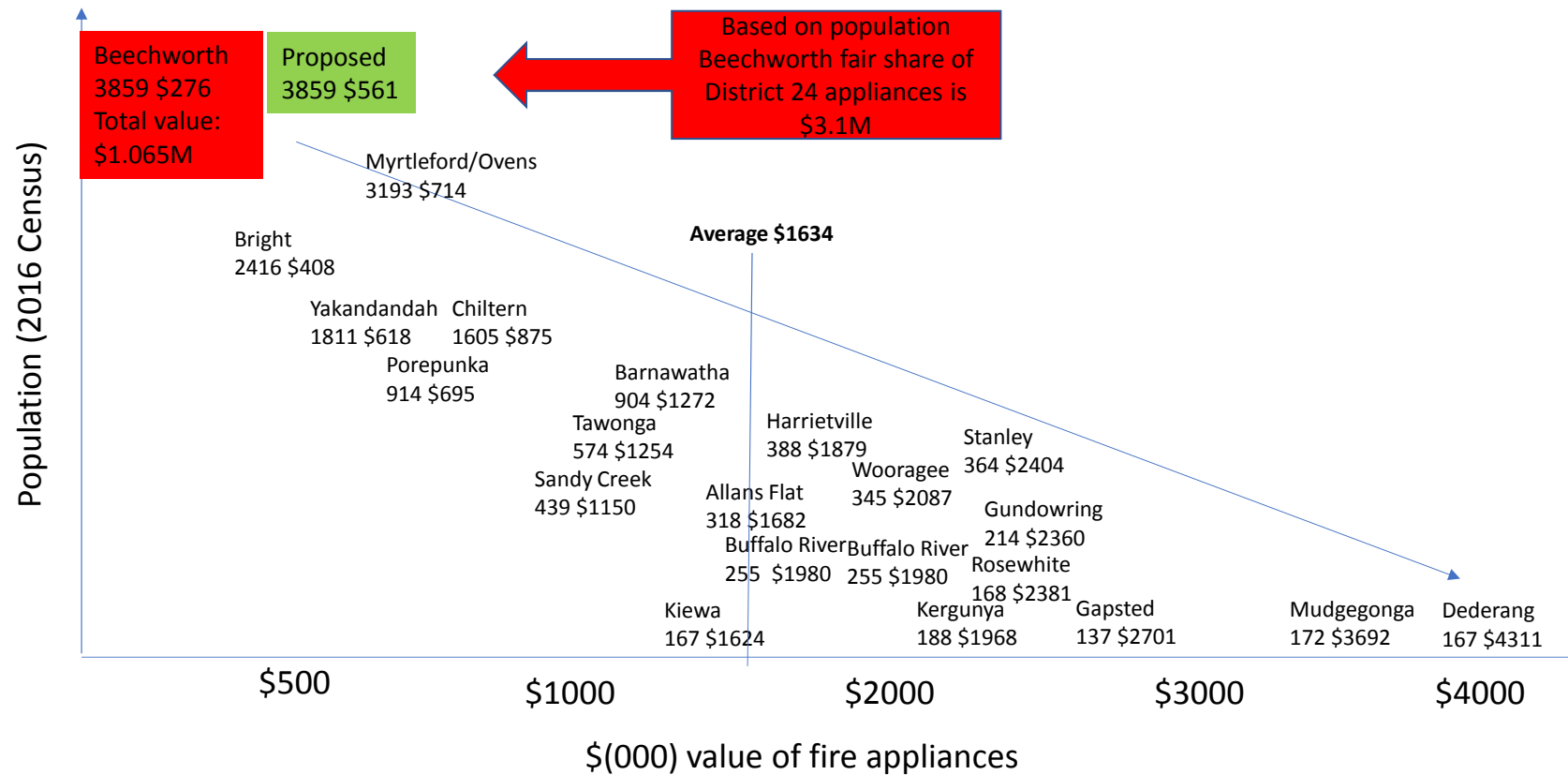
- 2 x Ultra light tanker – \$270k
- 1x Pumper Tanker – \$450k
- 1 x Light tanker & Shed – Fighting Gully – \$300k
- 1 x Light tanker & Shed – Woolshed – \$300k
- Replaced 3.4 Hino with new Heavy Tanker with suitable gearbox for conditions & equipment
- Existing - 1.5T Izuzu – 10+ Years
- Existing - Pumper Type 2 - 10+ Years



Total Value: 2,165,000 + Shed costs of \$170
Cost /resident:\$561
% of District spend: 14%



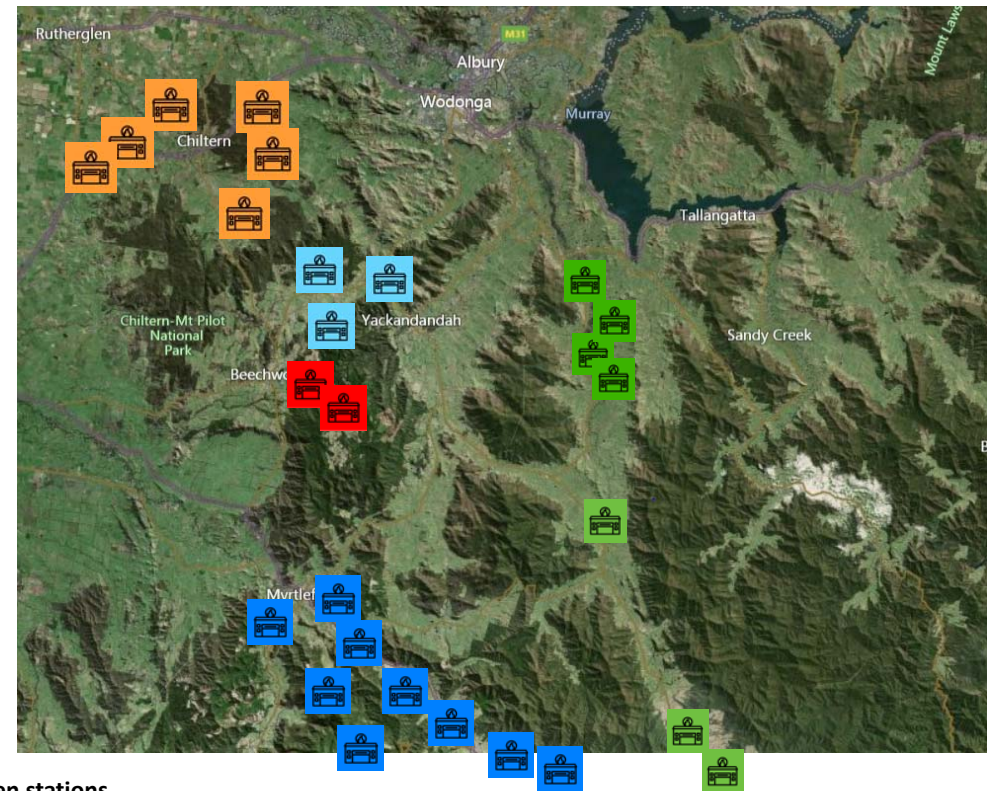
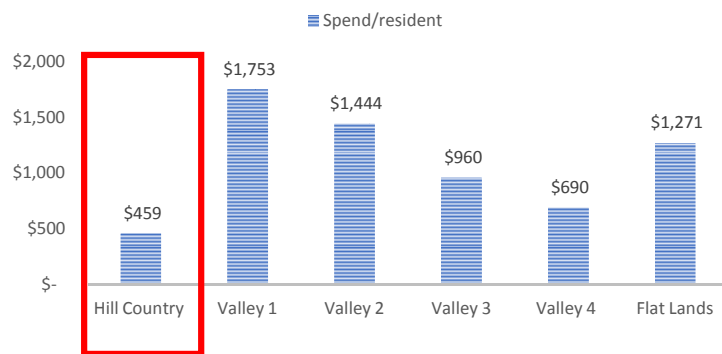
\$ spend/residents /postcode, highlights huge indiscretions with no logic being applied to how fire appliances are allocated



The Hill Country cluster further emphasises the extreme risk – isolation, slope /topography, all access roads are classed as extreme & therefore limiting back up appliances/support. Compared to other clusters who have a high concentration of stations that can be deployed faster, easier & with more appliances



DISTRICT 24 BY CLUSTER - \$ APPLIANCE SPEND/RESIDENT



Hill Country	Beechworth	Stanley							
Valley 1	Gundowring	Kergunyah	Kiewa	Sandy Creek					
Valley 2	Mt Beauty	Towonga	Dederang						
Valley 3	Wooragee	Allans flat	Yackandandah						
Valley 4	Bright	Buffalo river	Gapsted	Harretville	Mudgegonga	Myrtleford	Porepunk	Rosewhite	Ovens Eurobin
Flat Lands	Barnawath	Chiltern	Cornish Town	Indigo valley	Browns Plains				

Clustering based on distance between stations

Challenges within the CFA are reducing executional capability & putting volunteers at risk with sub standard equipment



Treatment of Volunteers

- No respect for opinions, knowledge or experience
- Combative culture
- Urban fire mentality
- No service mentality
- Not cooperative
- Poor communication
- Rewards subservience

Statewide Standardisation is more important than volunteer safety

- Not open to anything outside the standard even if its putting volunteers at risk
- Equipment faults are include: Transmission, lighting, pumping ability, volunteer Passenger safety
- Appliance based on modified urban platform as opposed to dedicated bush application

Organisational layers making it difficult to navigate /influence

- Multiple management layers
- High level of process & systems
- Abuse of power
- No ability to feedback or escalate challenges (as proven from the last 3 years)

Example 1: In the middle of a fire fight the so called chain of command is broken, putting volunteers & communities lives at risk...



Date	Time	Situation
9th January	10.00am	My Wife Michele was verbally abused for 10 minutes by a local resident around the lack of fire fighting appliance/s available to protect the town
9th January	4.00pm	Fire Conditions for Friday worsen and deemed as Extreme
9th January	5.30pm	Request for Beechworth's & Stanley's major appliances to leave town, to be deployed at Nug Nug/Myrtleford
9th January	5.30pm	Called Mark Owen (Commander) district to highlight concerns
9th January	10.00pm	No response from the district about this matter
10th January	6.00 am	Emailed the misters office
	7.00am	Major appliance to leave town, to be deployed at Nug Nug/Myrtleford
	8.30am	Minister assistant email saying he will contact CFA head office to get a DCO to respond to my concerns
	1.14pm	Minister assistant email saying he has not heard from CFA
	1.39pm	Minister assistant email saying he has still no contact with the CFA
	3.02pm	Minister assistant email confirming that the acting ACO has called Bruce
	3.03pm	Checked my phone & message bank - no record of the call
	3.44pm	Emailed the misters office asking the 'supposed details 'of the alleged call
	4.30pm	Minister assistant sent thru Adrian G details
	4.40pm	Called Adrian who was not aware of the problem and confirmed that he will call me back next later in the evening or the next day
15th January		Received a phone call from Mark - to discuss other matters. Also apologies for Adrian G not getting back to me
16th January		Mark Owens emailed Bruce to say 'can you pls advise of dates available in the 1st 2 weeks of February, we will then try and find a date that suits us''
27th January		No other contact has been made

Over 100 days have passed and I still have not had any contact from District 24. The responsibility to follow up is on the volunteers as opposed to paid staff

Example 2: Even when the smoke has cleared, a fact based presentation with a simple actionable solution has fallen on deaf ears... even within the organization in which we risk our lives to serve ...



31st January
**Indigo Shire Mayor
 Jenny O'Conner**
 Response:
 Informed & frustrated that as she had been historically communicated by the district CFA that we were well protected



4 February
**Member for Northern Victoria
 Tanya Maxwell –**
 Response:
 Concerned & originally wanted to visit but did not eventuate



4 February
**State member for Northern Victoria
 Jaclyn Symes**
 Response:
[NO ACKNOWLEDGEMENT](#)



12 February
**Federal member for Indi
 DR Helen Haynes**
 Response:
 Informed, concerned and encouraged us to reach out to Ken Lay & keep her informed of any updated



12 February
**Chairman of Bushfire Recovery
 Ken Lay**
 Response
[NO ACKNOWLEDGEMENT](#)
 However his office was passed an unofficial copy to EMV of which no acknowledgement was received



4 March
**Minister for Emergency services
 Lisa Neville**
 Response:
[NO ACKNOWLEDGEMENT](#)
 However even after agitation quoted *not my area*



4 March
 Chief Officer - CFA
 Steve Warrington
 Response:
[NO ACKNOWLEDGEMENT](#)

As a local Fire Fighting Captain trying to protect his volunteers, community, friends & family, I am left at my wits end as to how I can fulfil my duties. I truly hope the royal commission can be the catalyst to change & history does not serve Beechworth harshly

Time submitted: 20/04/2020 05:09:18 PM

Submission Number: NND.001.00538

Submission Of: Bruce Forrest

Your Details

Email address: blkr1955@gmail.com

Phone: 0427 281 833

Preferred means of contact: Phone

What is your submission based on? I am making this submission based on my professional knowledge, qualifications or experience or on behalf of a group or organisation

What is your area of professional expertise?

If you are lodging your submission on behalf of a group or organisation, what is the name of the group or organisation? Beechworth Rural Fire Brigade

Your Submission

In your experience, what areas of the bushfire emergency response worked well?

At the fire ground level all the volunteers & teams worked well: team work, communication, interaction within the CFA and Forest Fire management

In your experience, what areas of the bushfire emergency response didn't work well?

Details of our experience is in the supporting material, however a summary is below:

Sustained and systemic under resourcing of firefighting equipment in Beechworth continues to put the lives of our community and volunteer fire fighters at risk.

In short, the local Beechworth Rural Fire Brigade have been lobbying unsuccessfully through formal CFA channels to gain suitable and safe firefighting equipment to protect our town since the last major fire event in 2009.

Beechworth is classified as a high fire risk township and is considered a fire anomaly in the state, yet we do not have fit for purpose fire-fighting equipment. The facts:

Beechworth is perched on top of a hill, surrounded by high risk eucalyptus and pine forests. The fact that 10 degrees of slope, can double the speed of the fire & parts of the local topography exceeding 40-degree slopes

Beechworth has a resident population of 4000 that swells to 20,000 in peak tourism periods. 50% of the town is at extreme risk and its 30+ nationally listed buildings are under threat.

All Beechworth's entry/exit roads are classified as high fire risk which significantly limits escape points and access points for back up support. Beechworth may be totally reliant on air-bombing support.

The greatest and likeliest risk to the town is a fire from the Gorge yet the brigade does not have a fit for purpose appliance that can easily access that area. The only vehicles available are volunteer owned vehicles that are over 30 years old.

The most suitable equipment is an ultralight vehicle and Beechworth requires two, at a relatively low cost of \$135,000 each. All requests for fit-for-purpose ultralights made to the CFA have been rejected over the past 10 years whilst at the same time over 80% of our sister brigades in the area have received them.

BEECHWORTH is allocated 6 times less fire-fighting appliance investment per resident than the average in District 24.

BEECHWORTH has 20% of the population of District 24, yet the town is allocated only 7% of the fire-fighting appliances. For example, Barnawartha with a population of 904 has a greater \$value in appliances (\$1,150,000) at its disposal than Beechworth (\$1,065,000).

There is no clear rationale for the allocation of resources, based on population, risk or topography

- Training is not only lacking practical and safe applications (ie primarily on line training), the number of training spots is limited and capped.

The output of this is it puts scheduling at risk based on the lack of trained 4WD operators

- Appliance based on modified urban platform as opposed to dedicated bush application - ie The Heavy tanker has an angle gear box which in the local terrain of Beechworth free wheels out of control unless manned by a highly trained operator. Based on safety concerns the Beechworth Brigade deemed this tanker unsafe. This was then seen from the Local district 24 command as insubordination and we were provided with another Brigades cast off which was suitable but over 10 years old

In your experience, what needs to change to improve arrangements for preparation, mitigation, response and recovery coordination for national natural disaster arrangements in Australia?

A toxic culture within the CFA management is reducing execution capability & putting volunteers & communities lives at risk. This is characterized by 4) key areas:

1) Fire fighting equipment is not allocated according to risk, topography, population or need

2) Poor treatment of Volunteers

No respect for opinions, knowledge or experience

Combative culture

Urban fire mentality

No service mentality - the CFA management (district thru to state) are in service of themselves/headquarters as opposed to providing

Volunteers with the tools and equipment to protect their communities and the state as a whole

Not cooperative

Poor communication

Rewards subservience

3) Statewide Standardization is more important than volunteer safety

Not open to anything outside the standard even if its putting volunteers at risk

Equipment faults are include: Transmission, lighting, pumping ability, volunteer Passenger safety

Appliance based on modified urban platform as opposed to dedicated bush application

4) Chain of command is broken

Multiple management layers

High level of process & systems

Abuse of power

No ability to feedback or escalate challenges

Is there anything else you would like to tell the Royal Commission?

Based on my experience of over 46 years and contact with many other Brigades I believe that the toxic culture is evident at all management levels and is getting worse. In my opinion the Beechworth experience is replicated around the state and needs to be urgently addressed. With the upcoming fire services reform this is the ideal time to address this problem otherwise I feel that the CFA will loose the confidence of volunteers to the detriment of the safety of our communities and state.

Do you agree to your submission being published? Yes I agree to my submission being published in my name

Supporting material provided:

20.04.20 Beechworth Fire Brigade Royal commission attachment.pptx