



Council of Australian Volunteer Fire Associations Inc.

Secretary: [REDACTED]

Chairperson: [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

28 April 2020

Air Chief Marshal Mark Binskin AC (Retd)
 The Honourable Dr Annabelle Bennett AC SC
 Professor Andrew Macintosh
 Royal Commission into Natural Disaster Arrangements
 Locked Bag 2000
 MANUKA ACT 2603

via email: rcnda.enquiries@royalcommission.gov.au

Dear Commissioners

The Council of Australian Volunteer Fire Associations Inc (CAVFA) seeks this opportunity to put forward a collective view on behalf of its eleven member associations representing over 250,000 volunteer firefighters from all States and Territories of the Commonwealth of Australia. CAVFA is also an affiliate member of the Australian Fire and Emergency Services Council (AFAC) that is constituted from all the fire services of Australia and New Zealand.

Role of the Commonwealth in Natural Disaster management

Each State and Territory of Australia manages natural disaster events within their boundaries however recent extraordinary fire events have shown that mega fires are no respecter of State Boundaries nor can they be fought in isolation by each jurisdiction. The cost of aerial assets alone is too large an impost for each State or Territory to maintain enough numbers to combat fires of the size and ferocity experienced in the last fire season. The individual States have enabled legislation to provide co-ordinated response and in the past the shorter seasons and progressive development of fire have worked to the advantage of firefighting agencies however seasons are getting longer and support for the gap between our season and the northern hemisphere is tightening or overlapping.

The volunteer firefighter's role has expanded and the training they receive through National competencies that are coordinated through AFAC provide a seamless transition across borders using modern firefighting methods and equipment. The training and equipment costs are increasing, and States rely on Commonwealth disaster funding to supplement the cost in terms of aircraft, ground based equipment and salaries for paid firefighters. Volunteers are able to provide surge capacity to meet the ever-increasing demand for

skilled firefighters and recovery from natural disasters such as storm damage from extreme winds and flooding.

The call upon volunteer time is expanding exponentially. Many volunteers are dealing with threats to their own properties and the necessity of protecting infrastructure and neighbourhoods over prolonged periods. There have been calls for support to enable volunteers to provide these services without being put in a position of not being able to provide for their families. The answer to this is to ensure that there are sufficiently trained volunteers and equipment with supply chains to enable rapid reinforcement at multiple and disparate locations.

A major requirement is the provision of accommodation and meals for a large mobile workforce. The Australian Defence Forces (ADF) have proven to be excellent partners in the provision of logistic support for both firefighters and the civilian populace. The challenge is to provide joint training and an understanding on the part of fire agencies and the ADF in the use of their joint assets. This includes the need to involve volunteer firefighters in a logistic role working alongside ADF personnel.

Whereas volunteers jealously guard their unpaid status there are many ways that the Commonwealth can support them through concessions to their employers and support and recognition of generous companies who have provided many concessions that have been well received by our volunteer community.

Communication is a vital part of keeping communities safe and the communications infrastructure needs to be robust to cope with loss of towers and power supplies. This should be a Commonwealth responsibility although communications within agencies is a State or Territory responsibility. The general populace expects a single source of authoritative advice and we have seen that the Prime Minister is expected to play a leading role in National emergencies, whereas each State or territory can maintain its own advice if the fires are restricted to their territory.

One of the key questions that our volunteers raise is the fuel reduction in National Parks and Forests. This is rightly subject to environmental considerations but there is a sense of anger when vegetation is allowed to increase to dangerous levels in extremely dry conditions. There is no easy answer, but farming communities spend a great deal of time ensuring that they manage their land particularly where they adjoin bushland, they have serious concerns about how they can deal with growth along the interface. There needs to be a national approach to resolving this problem as fire trails are no barrier to overgrown bushland on fire.

In our submission, there are two keyways in which the Commonwealth could meaningfully contribute to the disaster management activities of the States. The first is in directly supporting the combat efforts of the States, such as through the logistical support provided by the Australian Defence Force (ADF) during the 2019/20 bushfire season. The second is through the development of a coordinated and consistent public information platform to deliver information to communities across the country, but especially for the benefit of communities in the vicinity of State borders.

We cannot expect the Commonwealth to provide financial and material support without input into the training, equipping and legislative framework that is required for successful disaster mitigation. The use of science-based firefighting and hazard reduction techniques is a shared responsibility.

CAVFA stands ready to provide a single point of communication with all volunteer firefighters and has the capacity, working through AFAC, to address the myriad requirements of modern disaster response.

Thankyou for consideration of our views submitted herewith.

Yours sincerely

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Chairperson