

Your details

Title

Mr

First name

Stuart

Last name

Reed

Submission details

I am making this submission as

Emergency services personnel

Submission type

I am making a personal submission

Consent to make submission public

I give my consent for this submission to be made public

Share your experience or tell your story

Your story

I am a member of my local bushfire brigade, which is the Blaxlands Ridge Rural Fire Brigade in the Hawkesbury. I was involved with the firefighting effort over a seven week period beginning from 12th November, 2019. On one occasion, I was at Colo Heights with a crew from our brigade. We were working on part of the Gospers Mountain fire, extinguishing hot spots on Putty Road near the Colo Heights RFS Station when we saw a convoy of trucks from Victoria's Country Fire Authority (CFA) arriving.

The first thing we noticed about these trucks was the Roll-Over Protection System (ROPS) inside their cabins – they were quite obvious, being a system of yellow-painted steel bars. Soon after that day in the campaign, two firefighters from Horsely Park brigade were killed when their RFS Cat 1 rolled over when a tree fell across the road in front of it. The front of the cabin had been crushed down to the scuttle, as RFS trucks only have a simple roll-over bar behind the rear of the cabin. Our cabins also offer no real protection from falling trees, where the bar-work inside the CFA trucks would probably help in this situation, too. Falling trees were a more common occurrence

during these fires than usual.

The next thing we noticed about the CFA trucks was their neat, almost slick appearance - there were no unnecessary protrusions from these vehicles. On RFS Cat 1 and Cat 7 appliances, there are grab rails, equipment boxes, ladder racks and the like which poke out from the main vehicle envelope and can snag branches, shrubs and rocks while navigating fire trails and bulldozer lines. The CFA trucks had all grab handles and lockers within the perimeter of the vehicle.

We later had an opportunity to have a closer look at the CFA vehicles, where the Victorians showed us some other aspects of their trucks. We had noticed that the rear passenger on the left side of the truck faced backwards, with their back to the front passenger, but we could not understand why. The CFA firefighters showed us that this rear-facing occupant faces a door at the back of the cabin that leads directly to the “crew protection area” behind the cap that is used in grassfire firefighting operations. With RFS vehicles, firefighters need to exit the cabin via the rear passenger doors, then climb up into the crew protection area. If the vehicle is overrun by fire, the firefighters in the crew protection area have to try to get down from there and then climb back up into the cabin. There sometimes is not enough time for this, so firefighters sometimes have to consider sheltering in the crew protection area, which offers no shelter from above. Victorian crews simply have to open the rear-facing cabin door to get back inside the passenger compartment of their vehicle.

Another aspect of the Victorian fire trucks was how the equipment lockers are set up. The lockers on RFS Cat 1 appliances have shelves which are fixed in place, although they can be adjusted. In the CFA appliances, the shelves slide out. In addition to this, each piece of equipment, such as couplings and adapters, clip into specific receptacles and are held in place – the lockers remain organised, even over steep, rough tracks. Equipment can be found and accessed quickly. This also means firefighters can work efficiently and safely on unfamiliar trucks, as they all have similar set-ups. The CFA members also told us that when a brigade takes delivery of a new truck, it comes with a full complement of new equipment, including chainsaws. In the RFS, when a brigade is given a new vehicle, it is stocked with the old equipment from the previous vehicle.

As the campaign went on, various brigades, including mine, ran into problems with chainsaws becoming unreliable and/or failing. This meant that occasionally, an appliance would be on the fireground without a chainsaw. On top of this, there are often occasions where appliances do not have qualified chainsaw operators on board. I once found myself in a vehicle with no chainsaw and no operators on board when we were near a firefront and found our way blocked by a fallen tree (see included image). Many firefighters, including me, think that all appliance drivers and crew leaders should at least have the Trim Felled Trees chainsaw qualification to avoid crews being caught in situations like this. Maybe a training programme run by paid RFS staff could increase the number of qualified operators, as volunteer trainers appear to be unable to train, certify and recertify the number of operators required.

Terms of Reference (optional)

The Inquiry welcomes submissions that address the particular matters identified in its [Terms of Reference](#).

Supporting documents or images

Attach files

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