

# SUBMISSION TO THE NSW INDEPENDENT BUSHFIRE INQUIRY 2019-20



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## **GLOSSARY**

**AVL** – Automatic Vehicle Location  
**COAG** – Council of Australian Government  
**CSNSW** – Corrective Services NSW  
**CPSU** – Community and Public Sector Union  
**DCJ** – Department of Communities and Justice  
**DPIE** – Department of Planning, Industry and Environment  
**DWO** – District Welfare Officer  
**FCNSW** – Forestry Corporation of NSW  
**FIMB** – Fire and Incident Management Branch (NPWS)  
**FMO** – Fire Management Officer  
**FOGO** – Field Officer General Operations  
**FOPS** – Falling Object Protection System  
**NAFC** – The National Aerial Firefighting Centre  
**NPWS** – National Parks and Wildlife Service  
**OEM** – Office of Emergency Management  
**PPC** – Personal Protective Clothing  
**PPE** – Personal Protective Equipment  
**PSA** – Public Service Association of NSW  
**RAFT** – Remote Area Firefighting Teams  
**RFS** – Rural Fire Service  
**ROPS** – Roll Over Protection System  
**RTO** – Registered Training Organisation (NPWS)  
**SES** – State Emergency Service  
**SMS** – State Mitigation Service  
**SOC** – State Owned Corporation  
**VKG** – NSW Police Radio (VKG)  
**WHS** – Workplace Health and Safety

## DEFINITIONS

### **'The Association'**

For clarification, the Public Service Association and Professional Officers' Association Amalgamated Union of NSW (PSA) is a state-registered employee organisation. The Community and Public Sector Union - NSW Branch (CPSU) is its federally-registered counterpart. All members of the former are also members of the latter, although not vice-versa. Where industrial rights and representation are pursued in the NSW industrial relations system, it is the PSA who is the relevant organisation, but where this is done in the national system under the *Fair Work Act 2009* (Cth), such as the state-owned corporation, Forestry Corporation of NSW, the CPSU is the appropriate body. For the purposes of this submission, the terms are interchangeable and will both be referred to as 'the Association.'

### **'Black Summer'**

On 13 February 2020, the Australian Broadcasting Commission's Four Corners released a bushfire special program titled, 'Black Summer'. The Prime Minister the Hon. Scott Morrison MP adopted this term upon announcement of a royal commission into the fires on 20 February 2020, with the media release entitled, 'National Royal Commission into Black Summer bushfires established'. This submission will adopt this term to refer to the 2019-20 Australian bushfire season, however it should be noted that the actual fire season lasted far longer than the official three months of summer (December-February). Erratic fires were reported in QLD as early as June 2019, while in NSW, fires started in July 2019, after which there was a 240 day run of active bush and/or grass fires across the State, finally coming to an end in March 2020.

## NOTE ON FIRE COMBAT AGENCIES

The Association has coverage of three out of the four direct fire combat agencies of NSW: the NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS), the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) and Forestry Corporation of NSW (FCNSW), with the fourth being Fire and Rescue NSW, which is covered by the Fire Brigade Employees Union.

It is the issues and experiences of our members in these agencies that feature most heavily in this submission and it is therefore important to have a broad understanding of the work that they perform in terms of fire management and response.

### NSW Rural Fire Service

Members working for NSW RFS are a key firefighting resource in that they participate in frontline firefighting teams locally, interstate and internationally in roles including:

- Crew Leader;
- Divisional Commander;
- Incident Controller;
- Planning, Operations, or Logistics officers and other roles in Incident Management Teams;
- Heavy Plant Supervision;
- Fire ground aircraft support and logistics, which is assisted throughout the state by NSW RFS responsibilities to;
- Manage, run and participate in hazard reduction burning programs (State Mitigation);
- Develop, run and participate in training programs and emergency firefighting simulation exercises;
- Prepare, manage and participate in fire season standby rosters;
- Contribute to the ongoing development and improvement of firefighting equipment and systems;
- Fill key roles on Bushfire Management Committees and support cooperative firefighting arrangements;
- Recruit and train firefighters; and
- Manage interactions with key stakeholders including neighbours over fire season preparedness, hazard reduction programs and other fire management activities.

We asked our RFS members to tell us stories they were proud of during the Black Summer bushfire season. These stories included:

*“The broad media warning 2 days out to get tourists to leave the NSW South Coast saved many lives (in the festive week) - we will not ever know how many lives this saved. This is an amazing success story.”*

*“Being able to help across the State this fire season has been a victory. When undertaking building impact analysis, we are not supposed to get involved in firefighting operations. However, being a trained fire fighter, I see it this is my first duty as to protect my life, my team, then the people around me then the environment as per the Rural Fires Act. So when I see people in need to a fire tanker or a fire is about to impact a house, I call for further resources or pick up a hose and try and protect that house. So then I can put it down as not damaged or destroyed.”*

## **NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service**

NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service are a key firefighting resource in that they participate in frontline firefighting teams locally, interstate and internationally performing the following tasks in roles including:

- Fire fighter;
- Crew Leader;
- Divisional Commander;
- Incident Controller;
- Heavy Plant Operators and Supervisors; and
- Planning, Operations and Logistics Officers and other roles in Incident Management Teams.

NPWS also run fire preparedness programs such as:

- Plan and implement hazard reduction burning programs;
- Develop, implement and participate in training programs and emergency firefighting simulation exercises;
- Prepare and implement fire season rosters;
- Perform roles as Duty Officers to manage RAFT crews and aircraft, aerial surveillance, vehicle patrols and initiate responses to smoke sightings and bushfires;
- Contribute to the ongoing development and improvement of firefighting equipment and systems;
- Fill key roles on Bushfire Management Committees and support cooperative firefighting arrangements;
- Recruit and train firefighters including seasonal remote area fire teams;
- Manage annual maintenance programs for a vast network of national parks roads and fire trails; and
- Manage interactions with key stakeholders including other combat agencies, local councils and neighbours over fire season preparedness, hazard reduction programs and other fire management activities.

Some of the efforts of NPWS staff made both national and international news, such as the protection of the Wollemi pines trees, or the food drop for 'Operation Rock Wallaby'. Members of the Association have recounted other success stories such as:

*"The Protective recovery of fire-impacted Corroboree Frog in Kosciuszko National Park".*

*"The saving of all the buildings (apart from two sheds) at Yarrangobilly Caves by six men who worked for 26 hours straight in horrendous conditions to save these buildings - they are based at Blowering depot in Kosciuszko National Park".*

*"Granite Creek, NENP - World Heritage Area. Local RAFT crews worked for two weeks controlling by hand tools and heli buckets a lightning strike fire in extremely steep and remote country. We kept the fire to less than 20 hectares. The nearest vehicle control lines would have been available when the fire was 1400hectares inn size. A great win".*

## **Forestry Corporation of NSW**

Members working for Forestry Corporation of NSW are a key firefighting resource in that they participate in frontline firefighting teams locally, interstate and internationally in roles including:

- Fire fighter;
- Crew Leader;
- Divisional Commander;
- Incident Controller;
- Heavy Plant Supervisor; and
- Planning, Operations, or Logistics officers and other roles in Incident Management Teams.

The Forestry Corporation run fire preparedness programs such as:

- Manage, run and participate in hazard reduction burning programs;
- Develop, run and participate in training programs and emergency firefighting simulation exercises;
- Prepare, manage and participate in fire season standby rosters;
- Fill roles as On Call Duty Officers to run a network of fire towers, patrols and other observation techniques and initiate a response to wildfires;
- Contribute to the ongoing development and improvement of firefighting equipment and systems;
- Fill key roles on Bushfire Management Committees and support cooperative firefighting arrangements;
- Recruit and train firefighters including seasonal staff;
- Manage annual maintenance programs for a vast network of forest roads and fire trails; and
- Manage interactions with key stakeholders including neighbours over fire season preparedness, hazard reduction programs and other fire management activities.

We asked our FCNSW members to tell us stories they were proud of during the Black Summer bushfire season. These stories included:

*“We managed to pull the Crumps Complex fire up before it burnt east through many properties in the Congewai Valley, or South east into Watagan National Park which would have exposed Cooranbong and then the Central Coast urban areas. We also contained the Owendale Fire in Pokolbin SF before it burnt east out into the Hunter Valley winery region. These were hard fought victories which could have been bad losses without the efforts of and wise decision making of experienced FCNSW staff and a whole lot of determination and hard work”.*

## INTRODUCTION

The 2019-20 Black Summer fires that engulfed the southeast of Australia for many months were of catastrophic proportions. They were twenty-five times the size of the deadly 2009 Black Saturday fires in Victoria.<sup>1</sup> They burnt an area the size of South Korea,<sup>2</sup> triple the area destroyed by the 2018 fires in California and six times the size of the 2019 fires in the Amazon.<sup>3</sup> More than 20 per cent of Australia's total bushland burned<sup>4</sup> – in NSW, that figure was closer to 40 per cent.<sup>5</sup> At least 80% of the Blue Mountains world heritage area and more than 50% of the Gondwana world heritage rainforests were burnt.<sup>6</sup> Thousands of homes were lost and entire towns decimated. An estimated one billion animals were killed; some species possibly made extinct. Thirty-three people lost their lives in the fires,<sup>7</sup> while smoke pollution has been found to have been responsible for up to 417 deaths.<sup>8</sup>

The state of NSW bore a large brunt of these catastrophic fires, with Emergency Services Minister David Elliott declaring it “the worst natural disaster the State has ever seen”.<sup>9</sup> Over the course of the fire season, that spanned more than six months, approximately 10,000 people were deployed in response to the natural disaster.<sup>10</sup> Many of these people were members of the Association.

Our members work in the agencies that were front and centre during the Black Summer bushfire crisis. These agencies include three out of the four direct fire combat agencies of NSW: the NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS), the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) and Forestry Corporation of NSW (FCNSW), as well as the State Emergency Service (SES), NSW Police Radio (VKG), and the Office of Emergency Management (OEM). Other public agencies that the Association covers that were impacted by the crisis, or were part of the response team, include Corrective Services NSW, Housing NSW and Community Services NSW as well as the Department of Planning, Industry and the Environment (DPIE).

First and foremost, the Association wishes to acknowledge the tremendous and extraordinary efforts of all our members who worked on the Black Summer bushfire season. Our members, both on the fire front and behind the scenes, worked tirelessly, in some cases continuously for over six months to keep the people of NSW safe. We all owe them a debt of gratitude. They are the overwhelming proof of why a community is only as strong as the value it places in its public services. We could not more proud of them.

In order to compile this submission, the Association surveyed our membership and talked extensively to our delegates about their experiences leading up to and during the Black Summer bushfires. Every case put forward in this submission has been informed by our members.

In the years just prior to the Black Summer bushfires, NSW was enduring one of the worst droughts in the State's history. Weather was drastically limiting the ability to clear fuel loads in national parks and on private property. Climate scientists had been warning of worsening fire seasons for decades. At a time when a government should have been doing everything within its power to *strengthen* its emergency service and fire combat agencies, the NSW Government was instead *cutting* and *restructuring* them.

The following submission will demonstrate that NSW was significantly under-prepared for the Black Summer bushfires, particularly in terms of being understaffed, undertrained and lacking in resources. A large part of this unpreparedness was due to staffing shortages in the fire combat agencies, both via vacancies and job cuts but most importantly due to cuts to critical roles in the area of fire management and response. The Association



believes that given that these fires were widely predicted, the NSW Government was knowingly negligent in not only failing to properly prepare its agencies for a dangerous fire season, but actively eroding that preparedness.

The Association will use this submission to put forward recommendations for measures that can be put in place to enable agencies to be better prepared and equipped for future catastrophic fire seasons. The overall recommendation of this submission is:

1. That the NSW Government increase the number of paid firefighters and fire management staff across all NSW fire combat agencies, including the NSW Rural Fire Service, the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service and Forestry Corporation of NSW in order to ensure that the State of NSW is best able to fight and prepare for future fire seasons.

A comprehensive set of further recommendations are detailed throughout the submission, relevant to each particular term of reference.

The Association welcomes the critical examination of these serious issues by this independent inquiry. These issues are of great public importance. The Association also requests examination of decisions where critical errors were made in some instances with devastating and fatal results.

The Association looks forward to providing any other assistance that may be required.

Yours sincerely,



Stewart Little  
General Secretary

<sup>1</sup> Read, P. and Denniss, R. (2020). 'With costs approaching \$100 billion, the fires are Australia's costliest natural disaster.' *The Conversation*, 17 January, <https://theconversation.com/with-costs-approaching-100-billion-the-fires-are-australias-costliest-natural-disaster-129433>

<sup>2</sup> Read, P. and Denniss, R. (2020). 'With costs approaching \$100 billion, the fires are Australia's costliest natural disaster.' *The Conversation*, 17 January, <https://theconversation.com/with-costs-approaching-100-billion-the-fires-are-australias-costliest-natural-disaster-129433>

<sup>3</sup> Flanagan, R. (2020). 'Australia is committing climate suicide', *The New York Times*, 3 January, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/03/opinion/australia-fires-climate-change.html>

<sup>4</sup> Cox, L. (2020). 'Unprecedented globally: more than 20% of Australia's forests burnt in bushfires', *The Guardian Australia*, 24 February, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/feb/25/unprecedented-globally-more-than-20-of-australias-forests-burnt-in-bushfires>

<sup>5</sup> NSW Parliament, (2020). 'Portfolio Committee No. 7 – Planning and Environment: Energy and Environment' Estimates Hearing uncorrected transcript, 6 March

<sup>6</sup> Cox, L. and Evershed, N. (2020). 'It's heart-wrenching: 80% of Blue Mountains and 50% of Gondwana rainforests burn in bushfires', *The Guardian Australia*, 17 January, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/jan/17/its-heart-wrenching-80-of-blue-mountains-and-50-of-gondwana-rainforests-burn-in-bushfires>

<sup>7</sup> Richards, L., Brew, N., and Smith, L. (2020). '2019-20 Australian bushfires – frequently asked questions: a quick guide', *Parliament of Australia Parliamentary Library*, 12 March, [https://www.aph.gov.au/About\\_Parliament/Parliamentary\\_Departments/Parliamentary\\_Library/pubs/rp/rp1920/Quick\\_Guides/AustralianBushfires](https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp1920/Quick_Guides/AustralianBushfires)

<sup>8</sup> Borchers Arriagada, N., Palmer, A.J., Boman, D.M.J., Morgan, G.G., Jalaludin, B.B., and Johnston, F.H. (2020). 'Unprecedented smoke-related health burden associated with the 2019-20 bushfires in eastern Australia', in *The Medical Journal of Australia*, 12 March doi:[10.5694/mja2.50545](https://doi.org/10.5694/mja2.50545)

<sup>9</sup> NSW Parliament, (2020). 'Portfolio Committee No. 5 – Legal Affairs: Police and Emergency Services' Estimates Hearing uncorrected transcript, 10 March

<sup>10</sup> NSW Parliament, (2020). 'Portfolio Committee No. 5 – Legal Affairs: Police and Emergency Services' Estimates Hearing uncorrected transcript, 10 March

# CHAPTER ONE

## Climate Action Now

### Response to

**Term of Reference 1: “The cause of, and factors contributing to, the frequency, intensity, timing and location of, bushfires in NSW in the 2019-20 bushfire season, including consideration of any role of weather, drought, climate change, fuel loads and human activity”.**

*“This season was like none I have ever seen. The volatility of the fire behaviour is a true indication of climate change in action”.*

- Member, NPWS

### Warning signs

There is one overwhelming reason why the Black Summer bushfires reached catastrophic levels: our climate is changing. Many experts commented that the unprecedented nature of the Black Summer fires were a clear demonstration of the effects of human-induced climate change. As James Collett of RMIT University, stated “Australia is now a striking example that is driving international climate change discourse”.<sup>11</sup>

Howes et al (2013) have labelled climate change a ‘wicked’ policy problem as it is difficult to solve and requires “a whole-of-government response.”<sup>12</sup> On occasion, solutions for or action on a wicked problem can be helped along by a crisis which opens a window of opportunity for radical policy change. Examples of this include the Port Arthur Massacre in 1996 which led to a complete overhaul of Australian gun laws, or the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbour which catapulted the previously reluctant United States into World War II.<sup>13</sup> It is too soon to determine whether Australia’s 2019-20 Black Summer bushfires will be the turning point in Australian state and federal action on climate change. This inquiry has an important role to play in making that determination.

Climate deniers and sceptics are often quick to point out that Australia has always weathered wildfires and that, although more severe than usual, this summer’s bushfires were nothing out of the ordinary. However, as Gergis and Cary (2020) have written:

*“In the past, Australia only had to contend with natural climate variability. Now, our entire weather and climate systems are being altered and amplified by human activity. Climate change is making extreme events even more severe, resulting in unprecedented conditions that are rewriting our nation’s history”.*<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Cox, L. (2020). ‘Unprecedented globally: more than 20% of Australia’s forests burnt in bushfires’, *The Guardian Australia*, 25 February, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/feb/25/unprecedented-globally-more-than-20-of-australias-forests-burnt-in-bushfires>

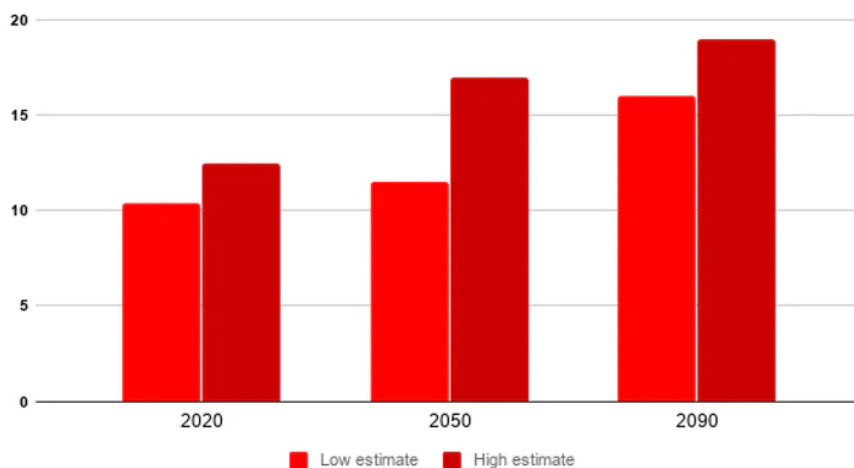
<sup>12</sup> Howes, M., Grant-Smith, D., Reis, K., Bosomworth, K., Tangney, P., Heazle, M., McEvoy, D. & Burton, P. (2013), Rethinking disaster risk management and climate change adaptation, National Climate Change Adaptation Research Facility, Gold Coast, p43

<sup>13</sup> Daley, J. and Milane, E. (2020). ‘Might the bushfire crisis be the turning point on climate politics Australia needs?’, *The Conversation*, 16 January, <https://theconversation.com/might-the-bushfire-crisis-be-the-turning-point-on-climate-politics-australian-needs-129442>

<sup>14</sup> Gergis, J. and Cary, G. (2020), ‘Some say we’ve seen bushfires worse than this before. But they’re ignoring a few key facts’, *The Conversation*, 14 January, <https://theconversation.com/some-say-weve-seen-bushfires-worse-than-this-before-but-theyre-ignoring-a-few-key-facts-129391>

There is also mounting evidence that the size and number of fires are increasing at an alarming rate.<sup>15</sup> The deadliest bushfire seasons in the past 200 years took place in 1851, then 1939, then 1983, 2009, now 2019-20.<sup>16</sup> This clearly demonstrates that the years between extreme bushfire seasons are shrinking rapidly. Bushfire seasons are also becoming longer and more intense – the extraordinary conditions experienced during Victoria’s Black Saturday fires in February 2009 later prompted the creation of a new ‘catastrophic’ fire rating, represented by a McArthur Forest Fire Danger Index of 100 or greater.<sup>17</sup> Gergis and Cary (2020) stressed that, “unless there are global reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, temperatures will continue to rise, increasing the risk that catastrophic bushfire conditions become Australia’s ‘new normal’”.<sup>18</sup>

### Bushfire Danger Days: south-east Australia



Projected annual number of days of very high or extreme bushfire danger. CSIRO/BoM/Bushfire CRC

Source: Scott Hamilton, University of Melbourne

Professor Ross Garnaut prophetically warned in the 2008 *Garnaut Climate Change Review*, fire seasons will begin earlier, end slightly later, generally be more intense and that this “should be directly observable by 2020”.<sup>19</sup> Unless serious action is taken, they are only going to get worse, as demonstrated in the graph below.

In his 2019 report for the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, Robert Glasser wrote that Australia is on the precipice of entering an “Era of Disasters”, with climate change – not terrorism or even cybersecurity – as the biggest threat to our national security.<sup>20</sup> Glasser warned that this emerging Era of Disasters will, “increasingly stretch emergency services, undermine community resilience and escalate economic costs and losses of life”.<sup>21</sup>

### Political war over fuel load

As the above section has laid out, the severity and catastrophic nature of these fires was in large part due to climate change. In areas where there were excessive fuel loads on the ground, this excess was also due to climate change. Climate change has changed weather patterns and therefore narrowed the window of opportunity for hazard reduction efforts to be made; it has brought on extensive drought, which has made fuel load which can’t

<sup>15</sup> Bradstock, R. and Nolan, R.H. (2019), ‘Drought and climate change were the kindling, and now the east coast is ablaze’, *The Conversation*, 11 November, <https://theconversation.com/drought-and-climate-change-were-the-kindling-and-now-the-east-coast-is-ablaze-126750>

<sup>16</sup> Read, P. and Denniss, R. (2020). ‘With costs approaching \$100 billion, the fires are Australia’s costliest natural disaster.’ *The Conversation*, 17 January, <https://theconversation.com/with-costs-approaching-100-billion-the-fires-are-australias-costliest-natural-disaster-129433>

<sup>17</sup> Gergis, J. and Cary, G. (2020), ‘Some say we’ve seen bushfires worse than this before. But they’re ignoring a few key facts’, *The Conversation*, 14 January, <https://theconversation.com/some-say-weve-seen-bushfires-worse-than-this-before-but-theyre-ignoring-a-few-key-facts-129391>

<sup>18</sup> Gergis, J. and Cary, G. (2020), ‘Some say we’ve seen bushfires worse than this before. But they’re ignoring a few key facts’, *The Conversation*, 14 January, <https://theconversation.com/some-say-weve-seen-bushfires-worse-than-this-before-but-theyre-ignoring-a-few-key-facts-129391>

<sup>19</sup> Hamilton, S. (2019). Climate change is poised to deliver more Black Saturdays in decades to come’. *The Conversation*, 7 February, <https://theconversation.com/climate-change-is-poised-to-deliver-more-black-saturdays-in-decades-to-come-111064>

<sup>20</sup> Glasser, R. (2019). ‘Preparing for the Era of Disasters’, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, Barton, p4

<sup>21</sup> Glasser, R. (2019). ‘Preparing for the Era of Disasters’, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, Barton, p4

be reached for prescribed burning, even easier to burn when a wildfire breaks out. According to the Bureau of Meteorology, the period since the start of 2017 was the driest comparable period in NSW's history. Rainfall has been about a third below the 1961-90 average.<sup>22</sup>

The Association has therefore been appalled by the political infighting that broke out during the Black Summer bushfires, often over hazard reduction burning and the state agencies which conduct them, particularly the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS). The debate has largely been between Deputy Premier and Nationals Leader John Barilaro – who has attempted to attribute at least part of the blame for the severity of the bushfires on a failure by NPWS staff to carry out more HR burns in national parks<sup>23</sup> – and Environment Minister Matt Kean who shot back, “I am not going to have people using the bushfires to push an anti-national parks agenda”.<sup>24</sup>

NPWS staff were pivotal in the NSW response to this summer's bushfire crisis. They spent over 40,000 collective days fighting these bushfires,<sup>25</sup> not only protecting the State's environmental assets, but also people and property. NPWS members have told the Association that with the fires so expansive and resources so stretched, there were countless incidents where they were the only crew on the ground to assist local communities.

*“NPWS crews were instrumental in saving life and property this fire season. NPWS crews in IMT were essential to providing on-ground knowledge and advice from the air on fire behaviour”.*

- Member, NPWS

*“I think our firefighters need to be recognised for the number of houses and lives that they have saved. How they were often the only agency to assist some landholders”.*

- Member, NPWS

*“There are numerous examples of NPWS staff saving many houses when other agencies were not present”.*

- Member, NPWS

The Association is incredibly proud of our NPWS members and we commend Minister Kean for his staunch defence of NPWS staff against his colleagues.

The Association will expand on its position on hazard reduction burning in Chapter Five.

### **Climate action now**

The warnings have been in place for decades, as scientists have consistently demonstrated the clear links between climate change and more intense bushfires and longer fire seasons. This has been an established position endorsed by firefighting authorities, the CSIRO and the Australian Academy of Science.<sup>26</sup>

In 2012, a senior Victorian fire officer said, “you do not find many climate change sceptics on the end of [fire] hoses anymore... They are dealing with increasing numbers of fires, increasing rainfall events, increasing storm events”.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Hannam, P. (2019). ‘Sydney faces perfect storm of fire risks’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 14-15 September.

<sup>23</sup> Johnstone, C. and Baxendale, R. (2019). ‘States under fire as inaction and incompetence on bushfire preparations revealed’, *The Australian*, 14 November.

<sup>24</sup> Smith, A., Snow, D., Hannam, P. and Alexander, H. (2019). ‘Political flare-up: Government MPs split over fire policy as state burns’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 November.

<sup>25</sup> NSW Parliament, (2020). ‘Portfolio Committee No. 7 – Planning and Environment: Energy and Environment’ Estimates Hearing uncorrected transcript, 6 March

<sup>26</sup> Smith, A. and Crowe, D. (2019). ‘Just don't mention climate, says angry Nationals’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 November.

<sup>27</sup> Howes, M. (2013). ‘What firefighters say about climate change’, *The Conversation*, 23 October, <https://theconversation.com/what-firefighters-say-about-climate-change-19381>

In April 2019, more than 20 former fire and emergency chiefs from multiple states and territories wrote to the Federal Government to warn that Australia is unprepared for worsening natural disasters from climate change and governments are putting lives at risk.<sup>28</sup>

In September 2019, 300,000 Australians took part in various marches across the country as part of a global climate strike, demanding that state and federal government take climate action seriously.<sup>29</sup>

During the Black Summer bushfire season, the MidCoast Council Deputy Mayor Claire Pontin told *The Sydney Morning Herald*, “we don’t have inner city greens up here. It’s the driest it’s been for 130 years. The average river levels are the lowest they’ve ever been up here”.<sup>30</sup> Bellingen Shire Council Mayor Dominic King said, “there is a growing movement of local governments across this country that have declared a climate emergency”.<sup>31</sup>

After the crisis, members of the Association wrote in urging their union to make sure climate change was front and centre of any submission made to the government about the bushfire crisis.

And the NSW Minister for the Environment himself, Matt Kean has said during this summer’s crisis that “climate change is no longer just a forecast” and that “we need to take responsible and decisive action on climate change and we need to do it now”.<sup>32</sup>

Australians want action on climate change. The people of NSW want action on climate change. According to Professor Ross Bradstock of the Centre for Environmental Risk Management of Bushfires at the University of Wollongong, “the research has all been done”.<sup>33</sup> Now it’s time to act.

## Recommendations – TOR 1

It is the overall recommendation of the Association and our members that:

The NSW Government increase the number of paid firefighters and fire management staff across all NSW fire combat agencies, including the NSW Rural Fire Service, the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service and Forestry Corporation of NSW in order to ensure that the State of NSW is best able to fight and prepare for future fire seasons.

In relation to TOR 1 of this inquiry, the Association further recommends that:

2. The NSW Government take direct and decisive action on climate change, including making all efforts to lower NSW greenhouse gas emissions.
3. That the NSW Government embed climate researchers within all emergency service organisations, including the RFS, NPWS, FCNSW, and SES so that they can work with agencies on developing a shared understanding of the risks presented by climate change, as well as shared strategies in lowering that risk and preparing for it.

<sup>28</sup> Cox, L. (2019). ‘Former fire chiefs warn Australia unprepared for escalating climate threat’, *The Guardian*, 10 April, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/apr/09/former-fire-chiefs-warn-australia-unprepared-for-escalating-climate-threat>, accessed 16 March 2020.

<sup>29</sup> ABC NEWS (2019). ‘Global climate strike sees ‘hundreds of thousands’ of Australians rally across the country’, 21 September, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-09-20/school-strike-for-climate-draws-thousands-to-australian-rallies/11531612>

<sup>30</sup> Dye, J. and Noyes, J. (2019). ‘Don’t... bring politics into the fire...What people in the thick of it are saying about climate change’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 November.

<sup>31</sup> Dye, J. and Noyes, J. (2019). ‘Don’t... bring politics into the fire...What people in the thick of it are saying about climate change’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 November.

<sup>32</sup> Kean, M. (2019). ‘NSW can be the Saudi Arabia of green energy’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 December.

<sup>33</sup> Smith, A. and Crowe, D. (2019). ‘Just don’t mention climate, says angry Nationals’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 November.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Under-Prepared Part 1: Staffing Cuts and Restructures

#### Response to

**Term of Reference 2: “The preparation and planning by agencies, government, other entities and the community for bushfires in NSW, including current laws, practices and strategies, and building standards and their application and effect”**

**and**

**Term of Reference 5: “Preparation and planning for future bushfire threats and risks”.**

*“While I was inspired by how well our staff coped and rose to the challenges during the season but there were not nearly enough NPWS staff and RFS volunteers to cope. The fires kept spreading because of a lack of people on the ground”.*

- Member, NPWS

In the years just prior to the 2019-20 Black Summer bushfire season, NSW was enduring one of the worst and most prolonged droughts in the State’s history. Weather was drastically limiting the ability to clear fuel loads in national parks and on private property, and hazard reduction targets were consistently not being met. Climate scientists had been warning of worsening fire conditions and therefore fire seasons for decades.

The warning signs were clearly there but were ignored by the NSW Government. The NSW Government failed to adequately plan or prepare for the 2019/2020 fire season. Instead the focus of NSW Government was cutting budgets and saving money which had devastating results. This is clear from the testimony and information provided by our members within this submission.

As a result of years of significant restructures and redundancies in key positions in all agencies, there were simply not enough fully trained and experienced firefighting and incident staff on the ground. The ones that were left were expected to do too much with too few resources in very challenging circumstances and suffered fatigue and exhaustion. They often suffered loss or damage to their own homes whilst fighting fires.

There was also over reliance on volunteers and casuals or lower paid staff without adequate training, expertise, equipment or experience.

To avoid the mistakes and devastating impact of the 2019/2020 fire season reoccurring, major and fundamental change is required within RFS, NPWS, Forestry Corporation and other combat fire agencies. Complacency should be over.

The focus should be on ensuring state agencies are fully funded, properly equipped and have specialist trained and paid staff to deliver firefighting and fire management all year around, not just in peak season.

In the months/years leading up to the Black Summer bushfires, NSW emergency service and fire combat agencies including RFS, NPWS and the Forestry Corporation (FCNSW) had undergone or were undergoing major restructures that had significantly reduced firefighting and preparedness capacity.

This was compounded by the fact that combat agencies were being subject to additional cuts via the NSW government's annual efficiency dividend and a number of agencies, including the RFS, were enduring chronic job vacancy issues. In this submission, we recommend that prior to any restructure occurring there should be mandatory consideration by the agency of the impact of a restructure or a reduction in staff on the agencies fire management or firefighting capabilities and that combat agencies are exempted from state efficiency dividends.

The most egregious fact about these cuts and vacancies were that they involved roles that were absolutely critical in preparing and responding to the Black Summer crisis. So critical, in fact, that in NPWS and RFS many of those staff who were made redundant were then asked to come back as volunteers, often placed in leadership roles. NPWS had at least 20 per cent less fire fighters going into this fire season than it did in 2011. In RFS, at the start of the fire season 19 per cent of positions in the structure were vacant.

The figures are stark and irrefutable. The semantics and political scoring that we witnessed in the media from the NSW Government about the reductions in staff and resources must stop. The focus of all of us should be on fixing the problem.

In the following section, the Association will outline these cuts and restructures in detail agency by agency and the impact on the reduced capabilities and preparedness.

There is a need for the Commonwealth to establish and fully resource a central coordinating authority that has oversight over the states and sets national standards of training, equipment, preparedness that apply to each jurisdiction.

## NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service

*"NPWS were under prepared and under resourced for this fire season".*

- Member, NPWS

In 2017, the then Office of the Environment and Heritage restructured the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) from 37 areas across the State to 8 branches. In doing so, they removed \$121 million from the NPWS budget and deleted, altered or relocated more than 778 positions. The restructure was prolonged and brutal, it took over two years and severely reduced NPWS 's firefighting capabilities reducing the number of positions and shedding experienced and long term staff.

When accused of "cutting" via this restructure, the NSW Government attempted to argue that rather than cutting national parks, they actually increased staffing numbers. What they meant by this was that while they removed many ranger and senior ranger positions, they increased the number of the lowest classification of field officers (Field Officer General Operations "FOGO"), paid just \$40,293 in 2017). Through this restructure, FOGO roles increased from just 3 FTE to 79 FTE. Overall Field Officer Roles increased, however many positions were still vacant during the bush fire season.

Meanwhile, Ranger numbers have decreased from 261<sup>34</sup> in 2011 to 193 in 2018 to 201 just prior to the 2019 fire season.<sup>35</sup> What is worse is that the senior ranger position was abolished in the restructure. This meant that NPWS lost up to 28 of the people with the most experience, breadth of knowledge, and greatest skills and expertise in strategic planning for hazard reduction and pest management.<sup>36</sup> The senior ranger position had greater strategic

<sup>34</sup> Clennell, A. (2019). 'Liberals challenged on ranger cuts', *The Australian*, 14 November.

<sup>35</sup> Morton, A. (2019). 'Factcheck: how park ranger numbers stack up amid debate over bushfire readiness', *The Guardian Australia*, 15 November, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/nov/16/factcheck-how-park-ranger-numbers-stack-up-amid-debate-over-bushfire-readiness>, accessed 16 March 2020.

<sup>36</sup> Morton, A. (2019). 'Factcheck: how park ranger numbers stack up amid debate over bushfire readiness', *The Guardian Australia*, 15 November, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/nov/16/factcheck-how-park-ranger-numbers-stack-up-amid-debate-over-bushfire-readiness>, accessed 16 March 2020.

responsibility for hazard reduction and pest management plans. As one ranger put it to *The Australian*, the people lost were those who know their patch and care about it.<sup>37</sup>

*“In my Area we have seen over 250 years of experience 'lost' in the last two years”.*

- Member, NPWS

*“The firefighting capacity of NPWS was cut in half by the restructure that removed hundreds if not thousands of years experienced firefighters walking out the door”.*

- Member, NPWS

The Association is extremely critical of the decisions of Government but is in no way minimizing the work of field officers within NPWS – field officers are just as dedicated as rangers and their work is vital. We also know that field officers were on the frontline during this fire season, working tirelessly to protect NSW national parks and communities. However, an increase in more field officer roles is no substitution for less ranger roles, which are higher-skilled, specialist trained fire fighters and perform more complex work.

Although there is no definitive timeframe for someone to become a proficient fire fighter, it would usually take about five years for someone to obtain a range of experiences that would make them reasonably proficient. During the Black Summer bushfire season, the Association understands that there were many young, inexperienced fire fighters across the state. It has been reported that there were field officers who underwent training in Blackheath in November last year, did the basic fire modules in 3 days and returned to KNP to fight the horrific Dunns Road fire which decimated a large proportion of KNP. Another example is in Oberon in January 2020. During these bush fires there were two young field officers who were not trained firefighters. They were being used as ‘gophers’ running out supplies to the fire ground as they could not fight fires.

As has been made clear, NPWS has lost a significant amount of expertise across the board. When it comes to firefighting capabilities and what state the NPWS was in ahead of the Black Summer bushfires, the numbers are particularly troubling. Overall, the number of trained and accredited firefighters within NPWS has fallen at least 20 per cent since the current NSW Government came to power in 2011. In 2011, there were 1,349 trained and accredited firefighters within the agency.<sup>38</sup> Currently, the government claims that there are 1,067 fire fighters,<sup>39</sup> however, the Association understands that the figure is likely even less. In July 2019, Minister Kean conceded there were 1044 trained firefighters in NSW Parliament in response to a question by Kate Washington. Whatever the exact number is, it is clear that the fighting force in national parks was reduced and less highly qualified than it was a few years ago.

The 2015 report *“Living with Fire in NSW National parks a strategy for Managing Bushfires for National Parks and Reserves 2012-2021”* identified the need to recruit firefighters to increase the number to 1350. However, due to restructures and job cuts, the numbers actually decreased so for example there were less trained fire fighters in 2019/20 than there were in 2017.

The irony was that those trained firefighters who were senior rangers and area managers before they lost their jobs in the 2017 restructure ended up being asked to volunteer during this summer’s fires to cover the critical shortage of trained and qualified fire fighters. One such former ranger was Kim de Govrik with four decades of experience in fire management, who is now an official with the Association. Mr De Govrik said rangers were being asked to do more with fewer resources and take on more responsibility in unprecedented conditions. Mr De Govrik commented that this recent fire season was the first of its kind in its intensity, danger and length in his whole career spanning 40 fire seasons.

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<sup>37</sup> Simalis, L. (2020). ‘The impossible choice: How cost-cutting failed bush fireys’, *The Sunday Telegraph*, 19 January.

<sup>38</sup> Hannam, P. (2019). ‘Government accused of hiding cuts in firefighters’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 November.

<sup>39</sup> NSW Parliament, (2020). ‘Portfolio Committee No. 7 – Planning and Environment: Energy and Environment’ Estimates Hearing uncorrected transcript, 6 March



As the Association's General Secretary Stewart Little reflected on *ABC Radio*:

*"I think you have a great deal of irony there, isn't it, that people made redundant are now basically being asked to come back and work".<sup>40</sup>*

In cutting the numbers of rangers and senior rangers, and to some extent replacing them with field officers, NPWS also replaced senior firefighters with very inexperienced firefighters without adequate training. Further, during the fire season, NPWS had to fill critical shortages with temporary and contract labour field officers. These temporary officers were not trained or experienced. A large majority have not received the higher levels of firefighting training and, frankly, they are not paid enough to be expected to have senior firefighting skills. This fact makes the 20 per cent reduction in NPWS firefighters even more alarming – while the overall numbers were down by 20 per cent, the percentage of staff with the highest levels of firefighting training removed is much greater.

*"The restructure had a negative impact by losing a lot of skilled employees and this was evident with the lack of crew leaders and divisional commanders. Often we had many crew members and struggled to have the appropriate number of experienced supervisors for mostly all these new staff members - this was definitely an OH&S issue".*

- Member, NPWS

*"Staff being placed in roles that they were not trained - I.e. Divisional Commanders / Operations / D/IC. The result lost backburns, lost property, over runs of crews".*

- Member, NPWS

NPWS suffered a significant reduction in specialised firefighting skills as a result of the 2017 restructure, including those involved in Remote Area Firefighting Teams (RAFT). This has led to a decline in strategic planning and the use of methods such as "partial containment where raft teams were tasked to contain fires at key locations to put out a fire front".<sup>41</sup>

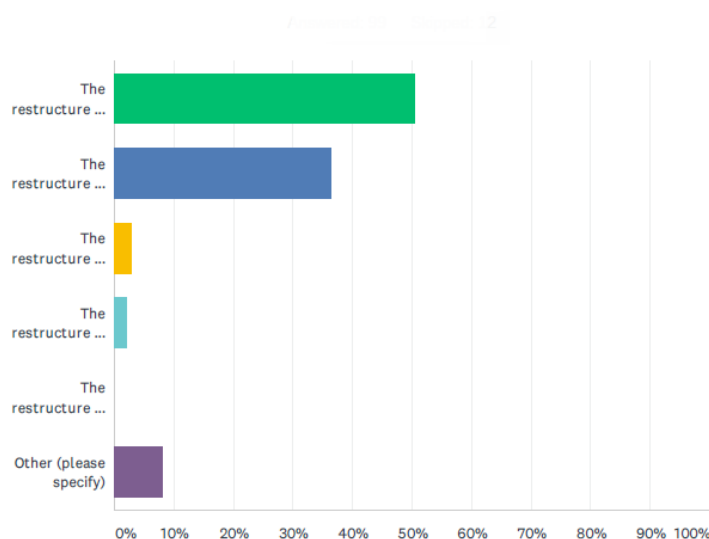
87 per cent of NPWS members surveyed told the Association that the restructure had a negative impact on the ability of the NPWS to respond to this bushfire season, with 50 per cent saying it had a very negative impact.

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<sup>40</sup> Roe, I. (2019). 'Laid off fire management staff offer to work without pay', radio broadcast, *ABC AM*, 13 December.

<sup>41</sup> Simalis, L. (2020). 'The impossible choice: How cost-cutting failed bush fireys', *The Sunday Telegraph*, 19 January.

Q10 To what extent do you think the 2017/18 NPWS restructure impacted the ability of the NPWS to respond to this bushfire season?



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
The restructure had a very negative impact	50.51%
The restructure had somewhat of a negative impact	36.36%
The restructure had no impact	3.03%
The restructure had somewhat of a positive impact	2.02%
The restructure had a very positive impact	0.00%
Other (please specify)	8.08%

Public Service Association (2020) Membership Survey – National Parks and Wildlife Service

The Association held a rally in Bega on 24 November 2017 to air concern that the 2017 restructure would make national parks unmanageable. Our calls to reverse the cuts were ignored by the local member Andrew Constance MP and the then responsible minister, Gabrielle Upton MP.

There are currently 100 vacant positions in the NPWS. These positions are front line firefighting roles primarily Rangers and Field Officers. Additional funding should go to the urgent filling of these vacant positions. Additional funding should also go to the establishment of additional RAFT crews with helicopters.

### Cuts to fire management and science

75 per cent of hazard reduction burning (HR) in NSW is conducted by NPWS.<sup>42</sup> Fire Management Officers (FMOs) – the very staff responsible for both hazard reduction and fire management and fighting in national parks - were also cut in the 2017 restructure.

Prior to this restructure, every single region had a fire management officer whose job was to coordinate and manage HR, and have knowledge of the topography, the weather and the fire behavior in that region. In reducing the number of regions from 38 to a mere 8 branches, the NSW Government consequently reduced those fire management officers down to 10. The Association’s Assistant General Secretary Troy Wright told *Paul Murray Live* on *Sky News* on 14 November 2019:

<sup>42</sup> RMIT ABC Fact Check, (2020). ‘Has NSW seen more than twice the amount of prescribed burning in national parks this decade compared with the last?’ *ABC News*, 5 February, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-01-22/prescribed-burning-nsw-backburning-hazard-reduction/11878316?fbclid=IwAR1fcJPpkfXHlt5GX0uNGVuyL7VIWfaFINF3OPI75V06bc4vObgRztOq3s>

*“There are ten people responsible in the entire state of NSW for fire management programs in national parks. There is one member that we have in our union that has the size of Tasmania to coordinate. It’s ridiculous”.*

NPWS has also been enduring an erosion of scientific expertise, which has been a common occurrence across land management agencies nationally. Firstly, specialisation has been replaced with generalisation, with the tertiary education requirement for land managers, including rangers, regularly being reduced to the level of generic ‘environmental science.’<sup>43</sup>

In NSW, the NPWS has done this, and then taken it even further, by removing many of the scientists from the agency all together, and instead dispersing them into various sections of the broader government department. Shifting scientific expertise out of the NPWS and dispersing experts across the public service has produced a “siloing” problem, meaning that important information and data is not being shared with people who need it. Moving scientists out of NPWS, effectively siloed them from the NPWS staff who undertake work to protect and manage flora and fauna, biodiversity and ecosystems both on and off park.

Overall, NPWS is currently lacking in highly skilled, specialised, and expert staff as a result of government cuts and restructures. These staff are critical in the both preparing for and responding to major bushfire events. They must be reinstated.

In talking to our NPWS members about the Black Summer bushfire season, we asked them how well they thought NPWS performed. There was a strong sense of pride and comradeship among their NPWS colleagues, as well those in the other combat agencies. The other common message however, was that they did the very best they could under the circumstances of not only the catastrophic fires but the damaging cuts made by the NSW Government.

*“Very well considering no budget has been loaded for this financial year and our resources were demolished from the restructure. We were very very lucky not to loss human life from our resources”.*

- Member, NPWS

*“Given the restructure, turmoil, and disruption created by it, and overall poor morale of staff leading into this fire season including loss of experience and knowledge the remaining NPWS team have done an exceptional job of getting through this fire season without a loss or death of a staff member. It is only through the dedication and professionalism of the remaining staff and of those left behind that we have managed to get through”.*

- Member, NPWS

*“NPWS has performed exceptionally considering the level of support, training, resources provided by the govt”.*

- Member, NPWS

*“Just that NPWS were there day in day out and regularly risked our lives... We continue to work courageously and professionally despite the near misses and constant dangers, the lack of support from our own department, devastating restructures and the constant abuse and blame we cop from the media and general public”.*

- Member, NPWS

### **Efficiency Dividend – NPWS**

One of the greatest resourcing challenges for NPWS is the fact that it is not a stand-alone agency. Not only does this make performing statutory responsibilities (particularly in relation to fire management) more difficult for

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<sup>43</sup> Tolhurst, K. (2020). ‘We have already had countless bushfire inquiries. What good will it do to have another?’ *The Conversation*, 16 January, <https://theconversation.com/we-have-already-had-countless-bushfire-inquiries-what-good-will-it-do-to-have-another-129896>

NPWS than other fire combat agencies, it also means that NPWS is not exempt from the government's annual efficiency dividend. This means that its staff remain under constant threat of potential job cuts or downgrading of classifications.

By being embedded within the Department of Planning, Industry and Environment (DPIE) (previously the Office of Environment and Heritage), NPWS is subject to the cuts that each government department is required to make each year in order to find savings. In 2019-20, DPIE has been required to find \$81.4 million in savings (**ATTACHMENT A**). In February 2019 the Secretary of DPIE, Jim Betts announced a "staffing freeze" amongst other saving measures in NPWS to meet the remainder of \$36.4 million savings target.

## The NSW Rural Fire Service

*"We were stretched right throughout the season, which is why we ended up going very early to activate our interstate and overseas arrangements to provide relief and to provide additional numbers. Off the top of my head, we ended up utilising somewhere around 6,000 or 7,000 interstate and overseas personnel to support the firefighting effort....Absolutely all fire services and emergency services were stretched this season".<sup>44</sup>*

- RFS Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons

*"Staffing levels are at an all-time low".*

- Member, RFS

As the Black Summer catastrophic fire season hit, the NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) was in the middle of a restructure. The agency has failed to explain why it embarked upon a restructure, given that the drought was priming the state for an intense bushfire season.

*"The RFS's decision to implement a restructure so close to a fire season, was a major strategic failure of management".*

- Member, RFS

*"As a result of [the RFS] planning to restructure, positions were held open. 174 vacant positions severely hampered the RFS's ability to fill vacant IMT positions".*

- Member, RFS

In August 2019, the RFS made the decision to implement the wide-ranging Area Management Model restructure just before the commencement of the worst fire season in living memory. This decision was a strategic failure which undermined the operational capacity and capabilities of the RFS.

RFS introduced the Area Management Model which changed the organisational structure from four regions to seven areas and reduced the numbers of experienced staff in key strategic positions. As a result, the RFS declared all Regional Manager positions excess, and the Regional Managers had to reapply for a position as an Area Commander.

The Association's members in the RFS undertake critical and often complex managerial, operational and administrative roles all year around and support a volunteer force of fire fighters.

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<sup>44</sup> NSW Parliament, (2020). 'Portfolio Committee No. 5 – Legal Affairs: Police and Emergency Services' Estimates Hearing uncorrected transcript, 10 March

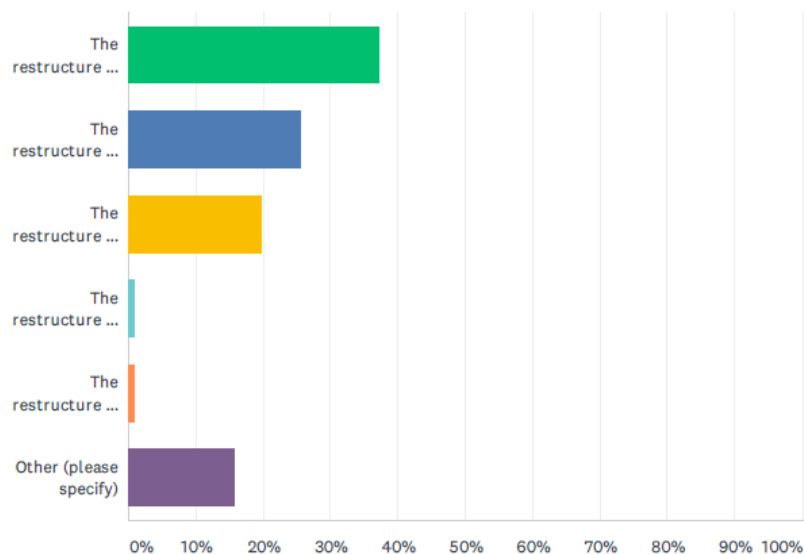
Further, in addition to their ordinary duties, the majority of RFS employees, particularly those undertaking operational duties, will be trained and qualified to be deployed into an Incident Management Team (IMT).

An IMT may be established in respect to any incident. The purpose of an IMT is to establish a managerial structure to support and assist RFS volunteers and members of other combat agencies in responding to a particular incident. IMT positions encompass a wide breadth of duties which extend from logistical support, to communications, to heavy plant and aircraft coordination. Some IMT positions are agency specific and can only be filled by the RFS, while the majority of positions can be filled by any emergency service agency with suitably qualified staff including NPWS.

The senior IMT position is that of the Incident Controller (IC), or in their absence, a Deputy Incident Controller (Deputy IC). The IC is responsible for the general management of the IMT, its coordination, as well as the coordination of the volunteers in responding to the incident.

63 per cent of the Association’s members told us that the restructure had a negative impact on the ability of the RFS to respond to this bushfire season. The full impact of the restructure will be felt in the future. One exacerbated member said it was just another “band-aid” solution to a broader resourcing problem. The Association consistently raised issues with the restructure, including issues with high numbers of vacancies, the lack of cascading command with the proposed restructure and the lack of clarity with using the environment function across multiple streams (**ATTACHMENTS F – H**).

### Q12 To what extent do you think the above restructure impacted the ability of the NSW RFS to respond to this bushfire season?



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
The restructure had a very negative impact	37.19%
The restructure had somewhat of a negative impact	25.62%
The restructure had no impact	19.83%
The restructure had somewhat of a positive impact	0.83%
The restructure had a very positive impact	0.83%
Other (please specify)	15.70%

Public Service Association (2020) Membership Survey – Rural Fire Service

### Vacancies

*“Delay in filling positions may have impacted on statewide resourcing particularly IMT personnel”.*

- Member, RFS

*“The Expectation that staff would stay on and work with no certainty of employment, some even having received end dates but still asked to work, had a massive impact on the morale of the agency”.*

- Member, RFS

*“The [Area Management Model] restructure fractured the family orientated nature of the RFS”.*

- Member, RFS

On 22 July 2019, just prior to the restructure, the RFS had 174 vacancies from 911 effective full-time equivalent staff. That is 19.09 per cent of its workforce.<sup>45</sup> The Association was aware of these vacancies and urged the RFS to fill them promptly and transparently. These 174 vacancies included positions held vacant within the agency, as well as newly created positions within the new structure. The newly created positions did not mitigate the positions that had been deleted and experienced staff being made redundant. The RFS was operating at the commencement of fire season at a reduced capacity in terms of staffing.

These vacancies could have been filled by staff trained and qualified to undertake the IMT positions which the RFS so desperately attempted to fill. The Association notes that as of 19 November 2019, the RFS reported 153 vacant IMT positions across NSW (**ATTACHMENT I**). Critical positions which extended from logistical support, to heavy plant operations, to aircraft coordination. The ability of the RFS to fill these positions was impeded by the number of vacancies within the agency.

The difficulties faced by the RFS in filling these IMT vacancies led the RFS to request that staff, without IMT training or qualifications, undertake IMT positions (**ATTACHMENT J**). This raises significant concerns about the quality of service which was provided by the RFS to communities threatened by the Black Summer bushfires.

### **The Return of ‘Redundant’ Staff**

Due to the RFS’s chronic manpower shortage, there were multiple instances of Association members, who were declared redundant during the restructure, being either temporarily retained or reengaged in a volunteer capacity, to assist the RFS. These RFS staff members were undertaking duties in critical roles, with no assurances of employment, resulting in a dearth of staff morale and productivity.

There are a number of examples reported to the Association by members, many who were long term and very experienced staff, who were not successful in obtaining a new position but returned to RFS as volunteers to help fight fires due to the absence of available staff or volunteers to fill vacant IMT positions.

In one example a long-term employee of the RFS, employed as a Regional Manager in the South of NSW, was made redundant in 2019, returned to the RFS at the start of the Black Summer bushfires as a volunteer to undertake IMT duties as a Deputy Incident Controller at the Currowan Fire and undertook multiple shifts as an Incident Controller in charge of the IMT and volunteer brigades responding to the fire.

There are other examples of senior managers who were advised they would be made redundant upon the implementation of the Area Management Model but due to a critical shortage of experienced IMT staff, they

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<sup>45</sup> NSW Parliament, (2020). ‘Portfolio Committee No. 5 – Legal Affairs: Police and Emergency Services’ Estimates Hearing uncorrected transcript, 10 March

were assigned to an IMT position during the Black Summer bushfires. They were then made redundant in the midst of the bushfire season, or just after they had undertaken IMT roles.

The loss of experienced staff such as Regional Managers meant the loss of local knowledge and expertise which in some situations had dire consequences. As one RFS member told the Association, the loss of one the Regional Manager, combined with the agency's attempts to streamline efforts from head office rather than from the regional districts very likely contributed to the significant loss of houses in some areas:

*"...there were lots of fires and difficulty in determining priorities however would you want strong regional knowledge for these decisions I think I would. With the regional manager gone I question whether the resources were appropriately delivered to the Eurobodalla. The Currowan fire started in the Shoalhaven and continued to be managed from Nowra. Despite the fact that the first houses it impacted were in the Eurobodalla it was still appropriate for it to be managed from Nowra (at first). Over the weeks that changed when it moved first further into Eurobodalla with an obvious potential run to Batemans Bay and then into Lake George LGA. Nowra under resourced the Lake George section and it was quickly realised that that needed to be run from Queanbeyan. At the same time it moved further into Eurobodalla yet the coordination at the state level again didn't to set up an IMT in Eurobodalla. This was resisted for another week or two with just a division run from Moruya. Finally when the impact on Batemans Bay was imminent and several other fires had started an additional IMT was set up in Moruya. The night shift that saw the line scans showing the fire moving into highly populated area was staffed by only 4 staff looking after the fires from Batemans Bay to the Victorian boarder including Mogo and Cobargo. At the same time IMT scaling down in other parts of the state would have had 20 people. The area of Eurobodalla and Bega are some of the highest risk areas with high tourist population and steep wet sclerophyll forests. Due to the scale and complexity the two districts should never have been teamed (again another issue). The same reluctant[ance] to have a Moruya IMT in addition to Shoalhaven continued with Bega division poorly supported from Moruya. The state mic desk and others in HQ didn't resolve these resourcing issues well and that could have contributed to these areas losing more dwellings than any other part of the state. In fact Eurobodalla and Bega contributed almost half the house loss for the state but I would guess a very small proportion of resources. Strong connected and knowledgeable regional mic desks would have improved the resource spread and many more strike teams should have been available New Year's Eve".*

- Member, RFS

### **Preparedness of Mitigation crews**

The RFS State Mitigation Service (SMS), which is a key element of the RFS response to natural disasters is, members say, "chronically undermanned". SMS crews provide NSW communities with an invaluable service via the performance of their various roles, which include: hazard reduction operations, participating in the Assist Infirm, Disabled and Elderly Residents (AIDER) programme, in addition to undertaking firefighting duties in the absence of local brigades.

The RFS has had a massive back catalogue of vacancies in SMS, including in RFS districts directly hit by the Black Summer bushfires. There are also retention issues, given that these staff are almost all employed on temporary contracts. In fact, the SMS is composed almost entirely of temporary employees. Given the danger of future fire seasons, this must be rectified. No public employee performing hazard reduction work should be on a temporary contract.

The Association was inundated with RFS members raising this as an issue:

*“Mitigation units are understaffed, poorly resourced and under used”.*

- Member, RFS

*“Need more mitigation not more fire trucks”.*

- Member, RFS

*“Not enough staff to support volunteers, or day to day processes relating to hazard mitigation”.*

- Member, RFS

*“In state mitigation we have a massive dropout rate due to the lack of full-time employment and qualifications”.*

- Member, RFS

*“RFS Staff numbers are completely inadequate to undertake the level of community preparation and bush fire mitigation required throughout the year (ie HR, property preparation, working with communities to prepare)”.*

- Member, RFS

*“Mitigation and community engagement are treated as after thoughts by senior management... Mitigation staff are still temporary employees with poor or non-existent career prospects”.*

- Member, RFS

*“Based off my experience this season... I can say with absolute certainty we were, and still are, grossly understaffed and under-resourced. In an Area of Operation requiring at minimum, 21 SMS Crew members and 7 crew leaders. We were instead operating with a total of 7 individuals. Three CLs and Four Crew. This is due to the complete inability of the RFS to retain SMS staff owing to employing them on short-term contracts. (Four years maximum). This leads to difficulties retaining staff who do not feel secure in their work”.*

- Member, RFS

As will be discussed, RFS is also currently deficient in District staff numbers. For the purposes of mitigation, this means there is a lack of trained and experienced staff who are able to assess, plan and supervise hazard reduction works.

*“District staff numbers have not changed since the implementation of the Bush Fire Environmental Assessment Code, even though individual roles have expanded greatly since that time”.*

- Member, RFS

*“The number of staff that can assess and approve hazard reduction certificates has not increased, training in this area has not increased. In the early 2000's the RFS recruited a*



*few hundred fire mitigation officers for the specific purpose of dealing with Bush Fire Hazard Complaints and approving Hazard Reduction Certificates (the streamlined environmental approval required for carrying out the works), these positions no longer exist and the work has been bundled with other tasks into new roles”.*

- Member, RFS

A significant issue for the RFS is the agency’s reliance on volunteers to conduct hazard reduction. Relying on volunteers has meant that hazard reduction can only be done on the weekend because volunteers are typically unavailable during the week. This further narrows the already narrowing window of opportunity to conduct hazard burns. For example, if the weather conditions only align for two weeks over a twelve-month period, limiting hazard reduction burning to only weekends would mean that only four out of a possible fourteen days were utilised.

*“Allow the State mitigation crews be more like a fire fighting force”.*

- Member, RFS

*“Reinstate State Mitigation Services as a one stop hazard reduction service that do nothing other than plan, prepare and conduct HR burns all year round”.*

- Member, RFS

*“If the state was serious then this would be a paid workforce, creating jobs in regional areas ensuring that the work happens”.*

- Member, RFS

Association members in the RFS (as well as members in NPWS and FCNSW) have overwhelmingly told the Association that the over reliance on volunteers is one of the greatest barriers to the RFS reaching its hazard reduction targets. If the RFS instead relied solely on its paid workforce to conduct hazard reduction burns, these could be done whenever the window of opportunity presented itself – during the week, over the weekend and overnight. The work would be guaranteed to get done and it would be performed by skilled professionals.

### **District staffing levels**

*“The number of people required to manage a fire and complete all the expected functions, especially reporting, has grown exponentially over recent years while staff numbers in district offices have changed very little and in many cases, not at all”.*

- Member, RFS

While the long term vacancies were across various areas of the RFS, the impact was certainly felt in the District offices which have been chronically understaffed for years.

One message that the Association has heard loud and clear from our members is that district offices remain understaffed. This is in spite of the fact that Commissioner Fitzsimmons has said that the 2019 Area Management Model restructure was designed with better supporting district offices in mind.<sup>46</sup>

*“There are not enough staff in district offices”.*

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<sup>46</sup> NSW Parliament, (2020). ‘Portfolio Committee No. 5 – Legal Affairs: Police and Emergency Services’ Estimates Hearing uncorrected transcript, 10 March

- Member, RFS

*“Need for more staff at District level to be able to assist the community with decision making, mitigation, etc. and training of volunteers”.*

- Member, RFS

*“We desperately need more staff at the district level to meet our agency responsibilities”.*

- Member, RFS

*“More staff at district level to provide coal face services to our volunteers and communities”.*

- Member, RFS

*“More staff are needed in district officers to help manage the day to day operations and to be able to man the office during peak fire periods”.*

- Member, RFS

In particular, the RFS must acknowledge that not only do any District office vacancies need to be filled but that there needs to be an increase in overall staffing numbers in anticipation of the growing length and severity of fire seasons.

*“Staff numbers are...inadequate to manage fires in most fire seasons, let alone the type of season we have just experienced. The number of people required to manage a fire and complete all the expected functions, especially reporting, has grown exponentially over recent years while staff numbers in district offices have changed very little and in many cases, not at all”.*

- Member, RFS

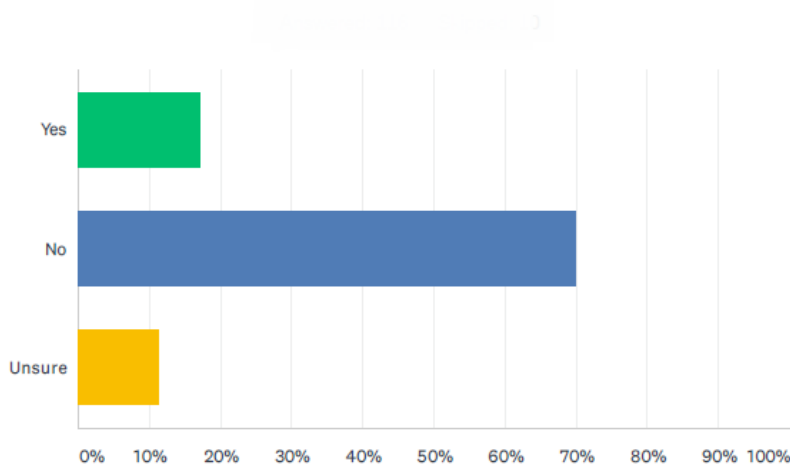
The agency-wide job cuts further affected District staffing numbers, as many staff were called upon to fill gaps elsewhere in the agency during the fire season.

*“The loss of Regional staff who traditionally assist in Major Incident Coordination roles within State Operations during S44 campaigns, was also a huge loss during this fire season, with these roles now having to be sourced from District staff - another drain on local resources”.*

- Member, RFS

The Association urges the NSW Government to take the calls for more resources from our RFS membership seriously. When the Association asked if our members believed that the RFS was well equipped to deal with future fire seasons, 70 per cent said no.

Q18 In your opinion, does NSW RFS currently have the necessary level of resources to protect and assist in moving forward into future events of this and lesser magnitudes and to continue to provide the necessary support to the Community of NSW, the NSW RFS Volunteers, NSW RFS Staff and a significant number of stakeholders.?



Public Service Association (2020) Membership Survey – Rural Fire Service

### Efficiency Dividend – RFS

As a stand-alone agency, and an emergency service agency, the RFS should officially be eligible for exemption from the NSW Government’s annual efficiency dividend. Other ‘frontline’ agencies are eligible for exception, such as nurses and the police.

However, these exemptions are not automatic – they have to be applied for each year. Given the layers of bureaucracy involved in this process, the RFS has not been exempt from the efficiency dividend for a number of years, meaning that it has been vulnerable to cuts, the same as any public agency. The Efficiency Dividend measures were implemented in addition to the Area Management model restructure.

Due to the recent bushfires, and the well-documented changing climate, it is the position of the Association that all emergency service and firefighting agencies should be subject to a review each year in order to determine how they can be *strengthened*. They should, under no circumstances, be subject to further cuts and should be automatically exempt.

### Forestry Corporation of NSW

As a state-owned corporation (SOC), Forestry Corporation of NSW (FCNSW) is expected to fund the majority of its routine fire management activities out of its own revenue. Over the past decade, FCNSW Management have cut firefighter numbers and budgets to improve the ‘bottom line’ of the business. FCNSW has also had significant cuts made to overall staffing levels over the past decade, with the last major restructure occurring in 2014. This has essentially decimated FCNSW’s firefighting capabilities and led to significant reductions in firefighting personnel including:

- A reduction in total full-time equivalent positions of almost 50 per cent from 1,045 in June 2007 to 539 in June 2017; and

- An increased proportion of casual and temporary staff, especially in fieldworkers who are at the front line of firefighting operations. These staff are not always available when required and suffer from higher turnover than permanent staff, with the subsequent loss of experience and knowledge.<sup>47</sup>

FCNSW has also had recent issues with ongoing vacancies, with one member writing:

*“...we have had a number of experienced field staff retire in recent years and they have not been replaced. As such, our permanent field staff workforce is half of what it was 3 years ago, and this had a big impact on our ability to fight local fires. This staff attrition needs to be reversed”.*

Members have indicated a need for more specialised firefighters in their staff, such as RAFT crews:

*“A resource I think FCNSW needs – and doesn’t have – is RAFT (Remote Area) crews. At present we rely on NPWS or RFS or interstate crews to conduct these works... We need our own capacity in this space”.*

There is a concern that there are not enough firefighters within FCNSW with accredited IMT training. While the number of IMT-accredited officers looks acceptable on paper, many of these staff also have specialisations in other areas such as being tanker operators or heavy plant operators. These roles are in short supply, meaning those with the skills are often called away, then consequently leaving firefighting crews without IMT personnel.

FCNSW members have told the Association that there is a lack of resources applied to hazard reduction burning and that there is an over reliance on volunteers to conduct these burns. Many members have stressed that FCNSW needs to make hazard reduction an organisational priority.

Overall, while FCNSW has a strong team of capable firefighters, there is simply not enough of them. As indicated above, FCNSW has endured massive cuts under this NSW Government, and is only half as strong as it used to be in terms of boots on the ground. The NSW Government must ensure that FCNSW has enough paid firefighters ahead of future catastrophic fire seasons, and provide additional funding to the SOC if required.

*“Bottom line is we need more staff. Staff who are trained and competent firefighters whether that is field or office-based firefighting. Critically, we need local firefighting staff who know the roads and trails, waterpoints and neighbours. We need them to be able to be a fire fighter, lead a crew, operate a tanker, supervise heavy plant and preferably - fall dangerous trees. We need this suite of skills in permanent local staff – so that these skills can be maintained along with the local knowledge”.*

- Member, FCNSW

The scale of the damage to FCNSW lucrative soft wood stock was so severe that the NSW Government was forced to shelve planned privatisation of the SOC. In fact, around half of the state’s softwood timber stock was burnt in the bush fire season. The reduction in firefighting staff improves the financial position of FCNSW for potential sale. FCNSW is vitally important and supports directly and indirectly many thousands of regional jobs and large parts of NSW’s natural ecosystems. The Association steadfastly opposes privatisation at any time in the future. The NSW Government’s priority should be restoring the decimated forest industry.

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<sup>47</sup> Public Service Association of NSW (2018). ‘Submission to the Keelty Inquiry into the Bega Valley Fire’.

## More paid firefighters needed state-wide

The Association would like to commend the courageous efforts of the thousands of volunteers who put their lives on the line this summer to fight the catastrophic bushfires. Staff and members of the Association were among those volunteers on the frontline and we are incredibly proud of and grateful to them.

The Association does not take a position on whether volunteers should be utilised by emergency service agencies to fight bushfires, but we do wish to acknowledge the shortfalls of *relying* on them.

The first problem with relying on volunteers is that you cannot guarantee their availability. The RFS claims to have more than 70,000 volunteers, but less than 20,000 are ever recorded active in a given year.<sup>48</sup> The Association understands that even during the Black Summer bushfire season, the RFS never had more than about 3,500 boots on the ground at one time.<sup>49</sup>

Furthermore, volunteers have other commitments, and their own work/life balance to manage. They are also an aging group, with many soon due to retire and a lack of new blood to take their places.<sup>50</sup>

Another problem with relying on volunteers is their geographic spread. The Black Summer bushfire season clearly demonstrated that regional Australia is the most vulnerable part of NSW in terms of bushfires. It is also the area of NSW most reliant on volunteers, rather than paid firefighters. Approximately 1 per cent of Australia's population are registered volunteer firefighters, however, the proportion of Australia's rural population volunteering with a bushfire service is closer to 4.5 per cent.<sup>51</sup>

Regional towns are already under so much strain with the drought. Jobs have been leaving the regions which means so too have potential volunteers. Changing methods of land management and agriculture mean there are fewer workers on farms and in the towns that support rural communities,<sup>52</sup> not to mention many regional NSW communities have been hard-hit by the downsizing of the public sector workforce over recent years.<sup>53</sup>

Given the catastrophic fire season that NSW and the nation as a whole has just experienced, and the fact that we know that more seasons like this are expected in future, there are also ethical and economic arguments to consider: to what extent it is right to rely on the unpaid labour of volunteers for an issue of such national importance?

Volunteers need to work to pay their bills and feed their families. As the fire seasons grow longer, it may not be economically viable for them to continue volunteering. Cull (2020) has made an educated guess that volunteers currently contribute more than \$1 billion to the Australian economy:

*"The amount and quality of volunteer work is, of course, variable. But let's assume each volunteer gives 150 hours of their time a year. This is likely conservative, given estimates of the time volunteers have given up this season. At the average weekly Australian wage (including superannuation guarantee), the volunteers contribute about A\$1.3 billion to the community".<sup>54</sup>*

Prime Minister the Hon. Scott Morrison was asked about this issue over the summer to which he replied, "the volunteer effort is a big part of our natural disaster response and it is a big part of how Australia has always dealt with these issues".<sup>55</sup> The Association argues that the drastic changes in the length and severity of bushfire seasons mean that the age old adage 'it is as we have always done' is simply not good enough. Yes, volunteers

<sup>48</sup> Smith, A., Barlass, T., Hannam, P. and Snow, D. (2019). 'Farmers take fire fight to home turf', *The Sydney Morning Herald* 16-17 November.

<sup>49</sup> Lewis, R. and Brown, G. (2020). 'Bushfire emergency: No longer safe to leave NSW fire zones, Premier Gladys Berejiklian says', *The Australian*, 5 Jan.

<sup>50</sup> Snow, D., Cormack, L. and Gladstone, N. (2019). 'Safety in numbers' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 16-17 November.

<sup>51</sup> Cull, M. (2020). 'Value beyond money: Australia's special dependence on volunteer firefighters', *The Conversation*, 23 January, <https://theconversation.com/value-beyond-money-australias-special-dependence-on-volunteer-firefighters-129881>

<sup>52</sup> Snow, D., Cormack, L. and Gladstone, N. (2019). 'Safety in numbers' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 16-17 November.

<sup>53</sup> Henderson, T. (2018). 'The Economic Importance of Public Services in Regional Communities in NSW', The Centre for Future Work at the Australia Institute, Canberra.

<sup>54</sup> Cull, M. (2020). 'Value beyond money: Australia's special dependence on volunteer firefighters', *The Conversation*, 23 January, <https://theconversation.com/value-beyond-money-australias-special-dependence-on-volunteer-firefighters-129881>

<sup>55</sup> Davidson, H. (2019). 'Scott Morrison rejects calls for more bushfire help, saying bushfire volunteers 'want to be there'', *The Guardian Australia*, 10 December, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/dec/10/scott-morrison-rejects-calls-for-more-help-saying-volunteer-firefighters-want-to-be-there>, accessed 16 March 2020.

have historically been a big part of our firefighting efforts, and every Australian is grateful to them for that. But the question now is, when we are facing future catastrophic fire seasons like – if not worse – than the season we have just endured in 2019-20, is it right and appropriate to expect volunteers to be responsible for the fate of the nation?

*“We have subjected volunteers to unreasonable stresses on decision making that should have been made by staff at the fire front not in a room some 200km away... if we want to succeed in the future, put the paid staff back on the fireground”.*

- Member, RFS

Professor of Hazards and Disaster Risk Sciences at the University of Sydney Dale Dominey-Howes, has called for a “larger, paid, trained, professional emergency management workforce”.<sup>56</sup> He has rejected that such a workforce would ever lay idle during the year, given that the fire season is getting longer and that the increased workforce could also be utilised for prevention work, including hazard reduction. The need for a larger workforce to conduct hazard reduction will be discussed further in Chapter Five.

NSW needs to equip its emergency service agencies with more firefighters. The foundations are already there – for example, 70 per cent of the Association’s surveyed members in the RFS are also RFS volunteers, and 56 per cent of them volunteered this summer. Also, as has already been addressed, many former firefighting staff who lost their jobs in restructures were called on to assist during the 2019-20 season. This demonstrates that NSW can and should have more paid firefighters on the books.

The Black Summer bushfire crisis exhibited that catastrophic fire conditions are too expansive and too dangerous for communities and governments to rely on volunteers. It is an unsafe and unfair burden to place on the shoulders of everyday Australians. All state and territory governments, including NSW, need to ensure that their emergency service and fire combat agencies are equipped to their full strength and that their paid workforce are the ones to lead Australians through any future catastrophic fire seasons.

## Recommendations – TOR 2 and TOR 5

It is the overall recommendation of the Association and our members that:

The NSW Government increase the number of paid firefighters and fire management staff across all NSW fire combat agencies, including the NSW Rural Fire Service, the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service and Forestry Corporation of NSW in order to ensure that the State of NSW is best able to fight and prepare for future fire seasons.

In relation to TOR 2 and TOR 5 of this inquiry, the Association further recommends that:

4. The NSW Government ensure that all public service agencies involved in emergency services and firefighting are exempted from the annual efficiency dividend, and that this exemption is applied automatically, without the agencies needing to apply each year.
5. The NSW Government strengthen the firefighting capabilities of every emergency service and fire combat agency, including implementing the following measures:
  - a) That the NPWS reinstate the role of Senior Ranger and repair the cuts to staffing numbers in the roles of rangers, fire management officers, pest management officers and ecologists.

<sup>56</sup> Dominey-Howes, D. (2020), ‘Australia can expect far more fire catastrophes. A proper disaster plan is worth paying for’, *The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/australia-can-expect-far-more-fire-catastrophes-a-proper-disaster-plan-is-worth-paying-for-129326>

- b) That the NSW Government considers the re-establishment of the NPWS as a 'standalone' agency so that they can better perform their statutory responsibilities (particularly in relation to fire management) consistent with other combat agencies while ensuring it can remain exempt from any enforced efficiency divided savings.
- c) That RFS make sure that all current vacancies are filled and commit to making sure any future vacancies are filled in a timelier manner.
- d) That the RFS review the staffing levels of each State Mitigation Service crew and ensure they are fully equipped to conduct necessary mitigation work across the State.
- e) That all agencies cease the utilisation of volunteers in hazard reduction work
- f) That the RFS State Mitigation Service is given full powers to coordinate and conduct hazard reduction burns on behalf of the RFS.
- g) That the RFS ensure that all roles involved in hazard reduction, including in the Districts and SMS are permanent positions.
- h) That the RFS increase its overall staffing levels in order to ensure that the agency is well prepared for future catastrophic fire seasons.
- i) That FCNSW increase its number of firefighting staff, across all levels and skillsets.
- j) That Forestry Corporation of NSW recognise hazard reduction as an organisational priority and that the agency consequently increase the full time workforce so that there are more staff available during hazard reduction burning periods.
- k) That prior to implementing any restructure or reduction in staffing all combat agencies must take into consideration the impact the potential impact on its firefighting and fire management capabilities.

## CHAPTER THREE

# Under-Prepared Part 2: Equipment and Communications

### Response to

**Term of Reference 3: “Responses to bushfires, particularly measures to control the spread of the fires and to protect life, property and the environment, including:**

- **Immediate management, including the issue of public warnings**
- **Resourcing, coordination and deployment**
- **Equipment and communication systems”**

Chapter Two comprehensively lays out the issues with resourcing, coordination and deployment for both the preparation and response to bushfires, namely that the lack of resourcing significantly impacted NSW’s response to the Black Summer bushfires. The Association will use the following chapter to put the focus on another important area of preparation: equipment and communication systems. The Association will not be addressing the part of the TOR about “Immediate management, including the issue of public warnings.”

Just as NSW was underprepared in terms of staffing, the State was also under-resourced in terms of equipment and communication systems. Once again, these issues were within the control of the NSW Government.

The Association asked its membership about what they thought about the existing fleet within their relevant agency, and what additional resources they thought was needed. This chapter will break these resources up into aircraft, vehicles, communication systems, as well as other technologies including tracking and mapping.

Overall, the greatest issue for all of these areas is consistency. Each state agency has its own standards and requirements for equipment and communications. Having different standards creates gaps, inequalities and inconsistencies.

Every firefighter should be equipped with the best available resources, no matter which agency they work (or volunteer) for, or in which state. Not only do the current standards vary across agencies, but there are also compatibility issues, such as across different communication devices. This created serious issues during the Black Summer bushfires: these fires spread wide and paid no attention to agency demarcation lines. What this meant was that agencies were fighting at the same fire front but at times with very different equipment – including incompatible communication systems.

As the Association has put forward in this submission, the increasing size, severity and longevity of fire seasons means that strong and effective collaboration and coordination both across levels of government and across agencies within each state and territory is absolutely essential.

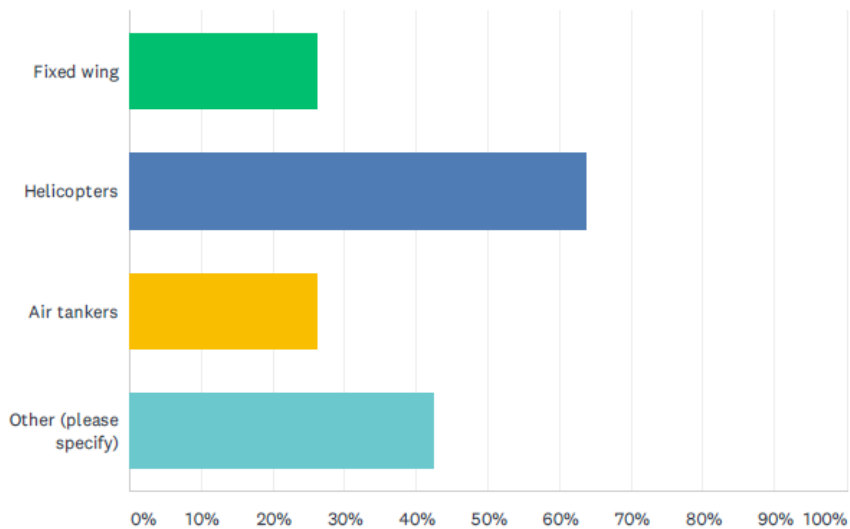


## Aircraft

*“There weren't enough resources - helicopters, Air Attack Supervisors, ground crews - to deal with many fires while they were small... Nobody understood the impact of this drought on fire behaviour - this meant resources that usually would have dealt with a situation comfortably, couldn't”.*

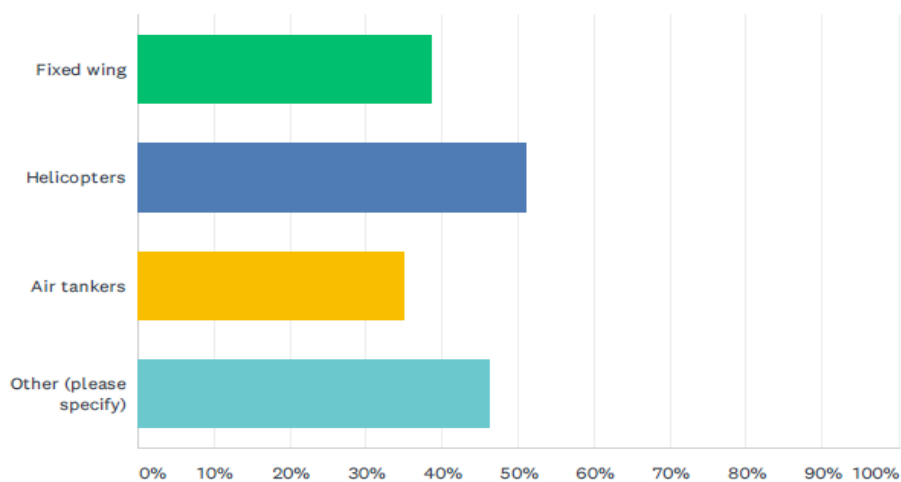
- Member, NPWS

Q11 In your opinion, does NPWS require more of, better standard, and/or updated models of the following aircraft (tick all that apply):



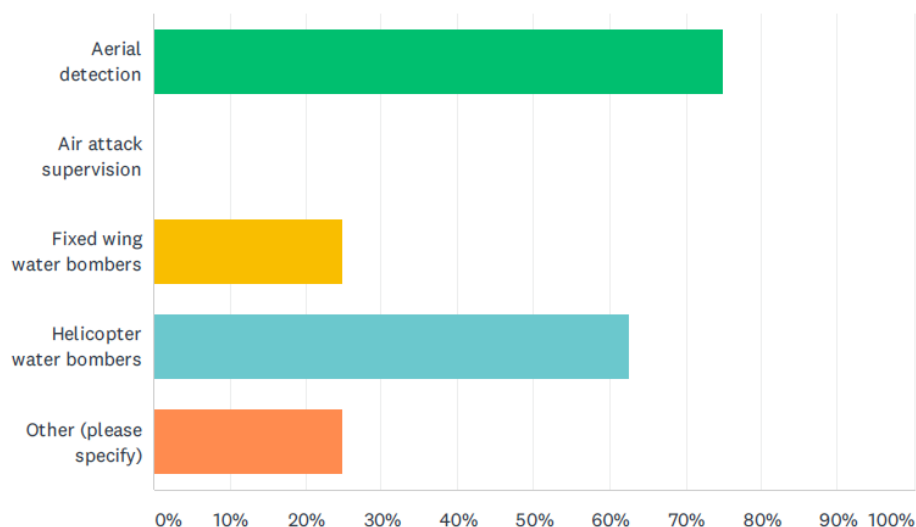
Public Service Association (2020) Membership Survey – National Parks and Wildlife Service

Q13 In your opinion, does NSW RFS require more of, better standard, and/or updated models of the following aircraft (tick all that apply):



Public Service Association (2020) Membership Survey – Rural Fire Service

## Q19 In your opinion, does FCNSW require any of the following aircraft types (tick all that apply):



CPSU NSW (2020) Membership Survey – Forestry Corporation of NSW

As can be seen in the above graphs, members from NPWS, RFS and FCNSW all indicated that their agencies require more aircraft than what was available during the Black Summer bushfire season. Given the spread of the fires and the longevity of the season just past and the expectation that there will be similar seasons to come, aircraft fleet sizes need to be increased in order to prepare for an increase in multiple ignition scenarios. These additional aircraft are needed in concurrence with additional Remote Area Fighting Team (RAFT) crews, as outlined in Chapter Two.

Firefighting agencies require additional aircraft in such scenarios to manage multiple ignitions, particularly in remote locations. As informed by our members, the additional aircraft should be helicopters with winch capacity and a RAFT crew attached to the aircraft to rapidly respond to ignitions and extinguish the lightning strikes before they become major wildfires. The acquisition of additional aircraft and rapid deployment of such aircraft could minimise the overall costs of responding to major fires as well as minimising the risks and threat to life and property of large wildfires impacting urban areas.

Given the spread of the Black Summer fires, priority was given to use aircraft to suppress ignitions close to townships and urban areas to protect life and property. Whilst these fires were being contained, ignitions in remote locations in National Parks were, in some cases, only monitored. However, given that we know the cuts to firefighter number in NPWS, the reality was that these fires were often left to burn unchecked due to the lack of staff available to monitor the fire.

Members identified the need for aircraft to be 'fit for purpose' and that too much emphasis is being placed on the use of Very large Air tankers (VLAT) and Large aircraft Tankers (LAT) aircraft with mixed outcomes. Members also identified a need to better coordinate aircraft resources at a national level, which will be further discussed in Chapter Eight.

Members further recognised a need for the agency to further embrace the use of Drone technology (specifically larger style drones which have the capacity to stay airborne for longer periods of time) particularly in remote locations and during periods of multiple lightning strikes. This would permit faster intelligence gathering that could be fed 'real time' into fire control centres. This would assist greatly with the rapid development

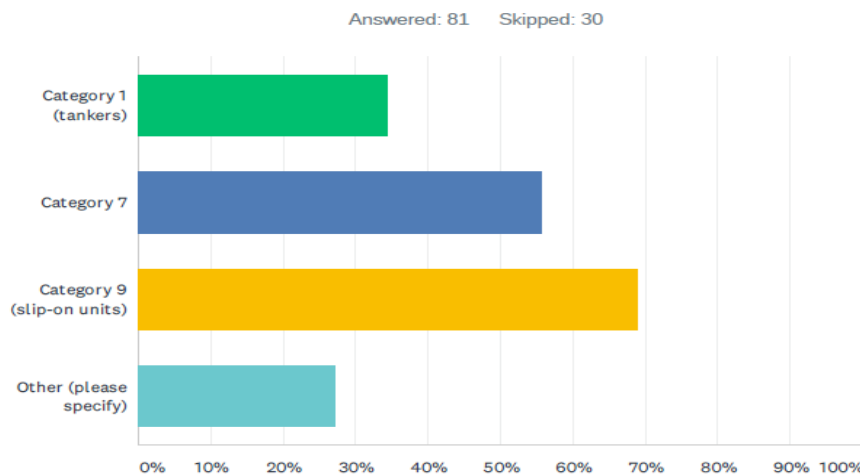
of strategies to contain and suppress wildfires and would also facilitate the expeditious deployment of resources to deal with such fires.

## Vehicles

*“All vehicle categories need to be seriously looked at across all fire agencies in Australia. The differences and standards are wide and varied, even between FRNSW & RFS in the same state.”*

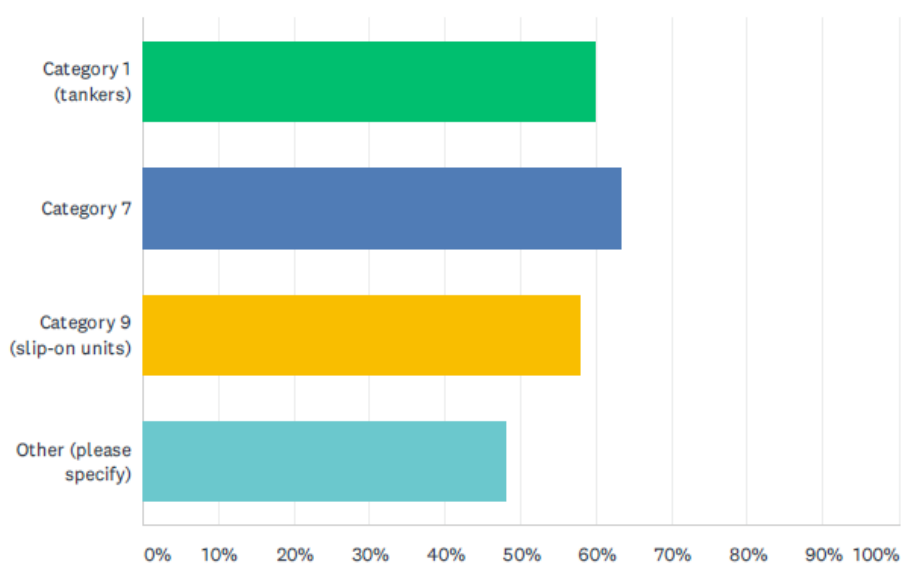
- Member, RFS

**Q12** In your opinion, does NPWS require more of, better standard, and/or updated models of the following vehicles (tick all that apply):



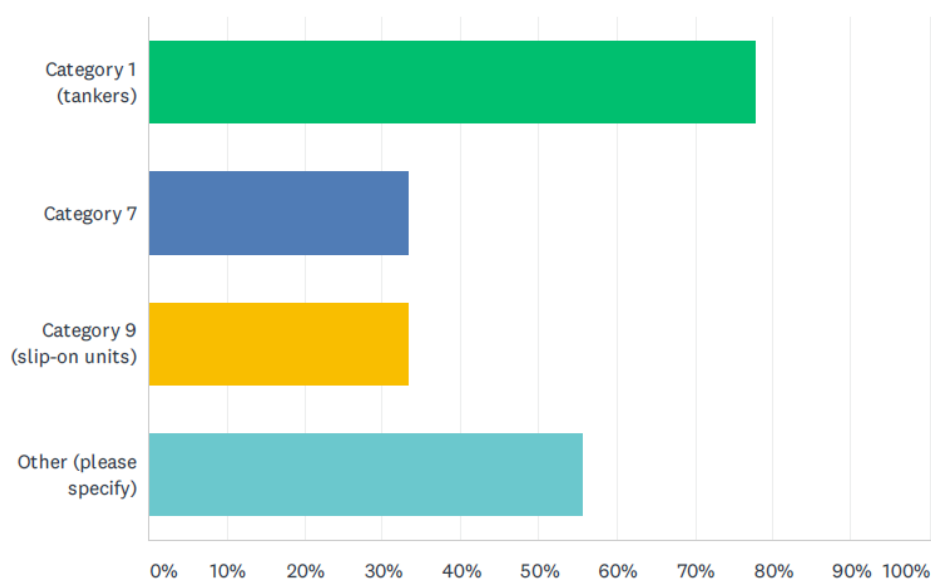
Public Service Association (2020) Membership Survey – National Parks and Wildlife Service

**Q14** In your opinion, does NSW RFS require more of, better standard, and/or updated models of the following vehicles (tick all that apply):



Public Service Association (2020) Membership Survey – Rural Fire Service

## Q20 In your opinion, does FCNSW require more of, better standard, and/or updated models of the following vehicles (tick all that apply):



CPSU NSW (2020) Membership Survey – Forestry Corporation of NSW

In discussion with members about their agency's vehicle fleet, the overwhelming issue appears to be consistency. During the Black Summer fire season, there were also not enough vehicles of right type for the fire ground. There were old vehicles, with some over 30 years' old which were still being used. There were instances of the wrong type of fire suppressant being used. Due to the lack of vehicles, unsuitable hire vehicles lacking the necessary safety and communications systems were being used at fire grounds.

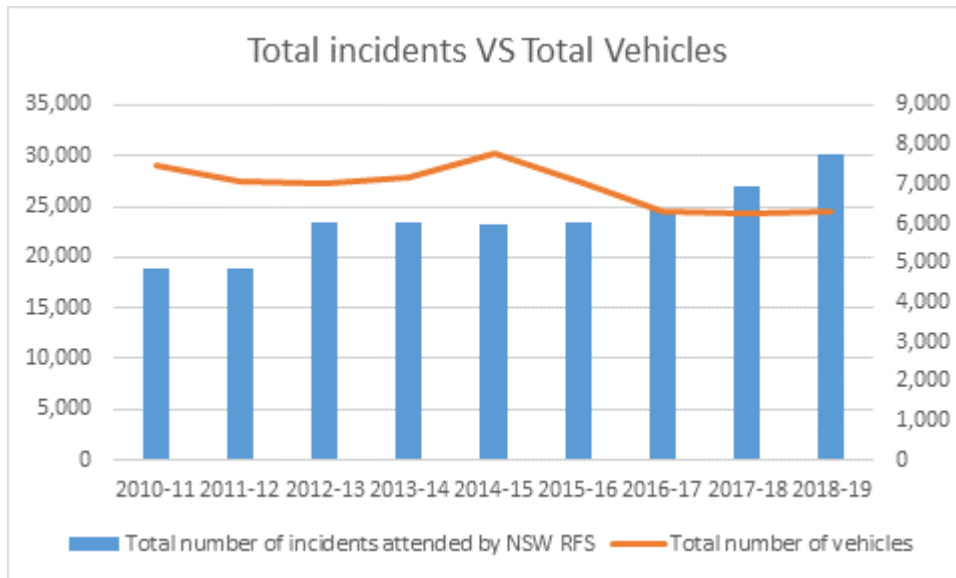
NPWS and RFS members were particularly concerned with the number and type of vehicles used in fire suppression efforts. Once again, members required that they be 'fit for purpose' (and the correct category) with some members suggesting that they be co-ordinated nationally and that the number of vehicles was inadequate.

Members in RFS were particularly concerned with the age of some of their fleet and the need for an upgrade of safety systems, as will be explained in Chapter Nine.

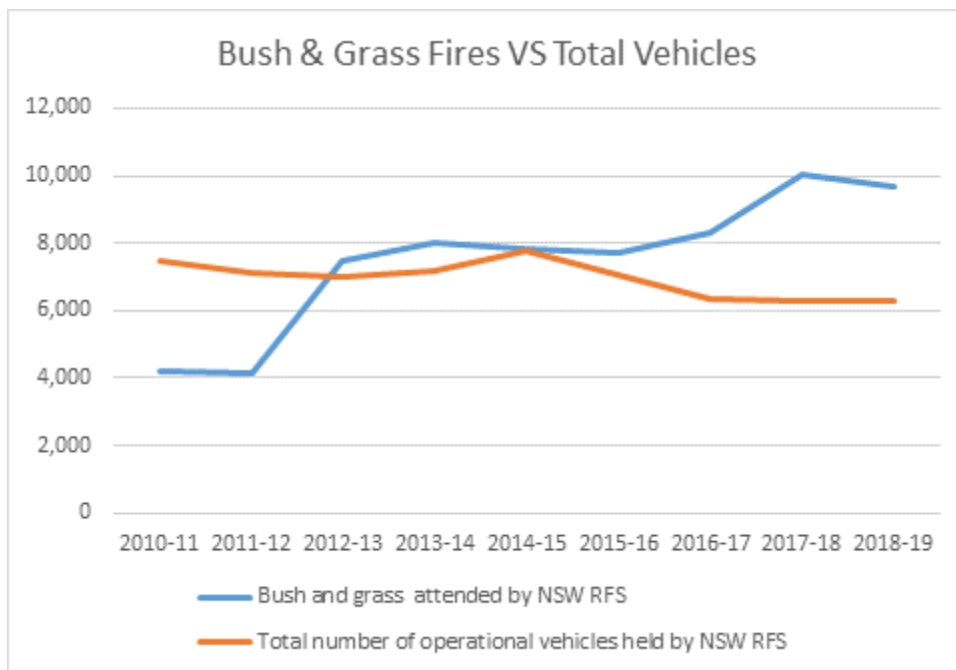
In an analysis of the data contained in RFS annual reports from 2010 to 2019, the Association has found concerning deficiencies in the RFS vehicle fleet. Note that this analysis does not include data from the 2019-20 fire season.

As the graphs below demonstrate, between 2010 and 2019, the total number of bush and grass fires responded to by the RFS has more than doubled.

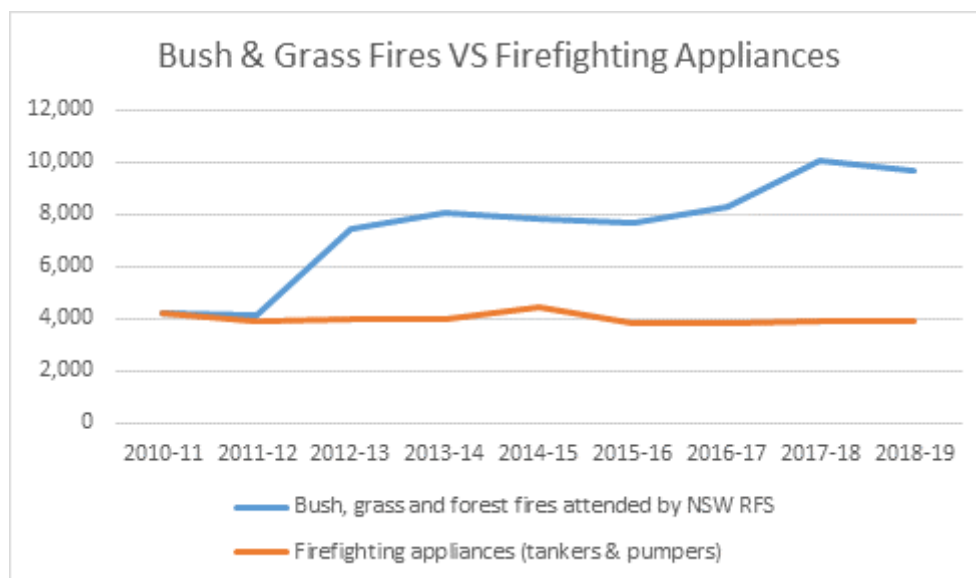
Between 2010 and 2019, the total number of [all] incidents responded to by the RFS increased by 37 percent, while the total number of [all] vehicles in their arsenal decreased by 16 per cent.



Data from RFS annual reports 2010-11 to 2018-19. Graphs arranged by the Association



Data from RFS annual reports 2010-11 to 2018-19. Graphs arranged by the Association



Source: Data from RFS annual reports 2010-11 to 2018-19. Graphs arranged by the Association

What this data highlights is that the catastrophic fires of the 2019-20 season hit right when the divide between resources and incidents at the RFS was at its widest since the current NSW Government came to power. Given we know that warnings of severe fire season had been in place for a number of years, this is a display of spectacular negligence.

Further to this, due to a lack of vehicles some vehicles had to be hired in both in NPWS and RFS). This resulted in potentially serious safety issues as vehicles were deployed to the fire ground that were not 'fit for purpose' (i.e. 4WD) and without two-way radios.

*"Some hire cars had to be used due to lack of vehicles. This meant personnel were in cars that had no radio fitted and no markings/beacons and no 4WD".*

- Member, RFS

Both the RFS and NPWS need to increase their fleet size to ensure they have the capacity to manage large scale and/or multiple fire events.

NPWS members also identified a need for an upgrade of the vehicles, particularly in relation to safety aspects of vehicles e.g currently very few (if any) NPWS vehicles have protective curtains or adequate sprinkler systems installed. Chapter Nine will address the safety concerns for vehicles including the fitting of appropriate protective systems including heat (flashover/burnover) protection, Roll Over Protection Systems (ROPS) and Falling Object Protection Systems (FOPS).

## Communications

*"At times communication between RFS, NPWS and Forestry Corp appliances was impossible because of their different radio networks".*

- Member, NPWS

*"Communications with other firefighting agencies need better coordination".*

- Member, FCNSW

*“Communications, all agencies in Australia must be able to communicate on one radio system when emergencies arise. It is unacceptable in this day and age of technology that 2 trucks beside each other cannot talk together because they are different agencies”.*

- Member, RFS

Members across all three fire combat agencies covered by the Association have expressed concern over the effectiveness of existing communication systems. The existing communication systems across the agencies are inconsistent and, most concerningly, incompatible. This is a significant safety issue that requires urgent attention.

*“Radio communication problems were very common and need to be addressed. We need a review and investment into bringing the different agencies together with congruent radio systems”.*

- Member, FCNSW

Communications have been an ongoing issue of contention for the firefighting agencies over the last fire season and for many years before this one. The lack of consistency over communications equipment across agencies, such as the fitting of Automatic Vehicle Location (AVL) devices, was raised in the 2018 Bega Valley Fires Independent Review conducted by Mick Keelty. Unlike the NSW Police Force, Ambulance Service of NSW and FRNSW – the RFS relies solely on radio and telephone communications, and does not have AVL technology or other GPS trackers in its vehicles or on its staff denying the State both situational awareness. The final report of the review recommended that the RFS should move to install AVL to all its vehicles immediately and before the 2018-19 bushfire season.<sup>57</sup> The Association understands that this recommendation remained yet to be implemented before the 2019-20 season.

Apart from communications on the fire-ground between and within agencies due to a lack of a unified radio network, there were also several survey responses that referred to miscommunication with the State Control Centre and local incident management.

*“Crews working outside two-way radio and mobile phone coverage in dangerous fire conditions. The mobile appliance (fire truck) could not be heard from, managed or advised from the Fire Control Centre. Effectively a loose unit in a remote, high risk bush fire ground. Happened repeatedly, on numerous fires, often for extended periods of time. Where is that Government Radio Network they promised us so many years ago? This huge safety issue also means we cannot talk direct to other fire units from different agencies (eg. Fire & Rescue, Forests Corp, RFS because there is not one, unified radio network. We do not know what the next fire truck up the line, in the smoke is doing or intends to do. Very dangerous at any bushfire”.*

- Member, NPWS

In addition, members in the RFS, NPWS and FCNSW were also concerned with the amount of ‘black spots’ for telecommunications in the regions. An upgrade and extension of the mobile phone system is urgently required to ensure safety at remote and regional fire grounds. The GRN radio system used by RFS members also has serious shortcomings including overcrowding of the network making it difficult to communicate in emergency situations or during periods of multiple fires. And whilst the NPWS can talk to the RFS and FCNSW on their radio systems, these agencies cannot talk to Fire and Rescue NSW.

*“In field technology devices and support systems. Radio communications are a significant area of concern with many of the 2,200 brigades only having one portable GRN radio. This dramatically reduces the level of communication with a crew when the number of portable radios is often 25-40% of the number of firefighting appliances. Once a crew*

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<sup>57</sup> Department of Justice (2018). ‘Final Report’, <https://www.emergency.nsw.gov.au/Documents/publications/Bega-Valley-Fire-Independent-Review.PDF>

*leaves the appliance (which they must do to fight a fire), most crews have no GRN contact with the Fire Control Centre or any fireground leader”.*

- Member, RFS

-

*“We need a better radio setup which has better interoperability with the other agencies”.*

- Member, FCNSW

A rationalisation of the different radio systems used by the four combat agencies is urgently needed to improve compatibility of communications equipment between the combat agencies. In the meantime, UHF radio channels are used as a ‘stop gap’ measure which also has its shortcomings (usually only works in ‘line of sight’ scenarios and conversations cannot be recorded by agencies). Vehicles that attend fires from interstate also do not have complementary radio channels and systems. Hence consideration should also be given to a nationally dedicated radio channel for fire operations.

Consistency and compatibility across communication systems is absolutely essential for future fire seasons. Communication is vital to effectively controlling fires, as well as ensuring the safety of our firefighters. The Association therefore recommends that the NSW Government undertake a review of the radio systems used by combat agencies with a view to be having a consistent approach to communications across the four agencies. And that consideration be given to a National system that will include the other States and Territories that assist with fire control in NSW.

## **Technology**

### **Tracking**

Further to the communication issues between agencies is the lack of technology to properly track staff and equipment. Members, particularly those in RFS and NPWS, have noted that tracking technology has not kept up with the demands of fire management.

Tracking resources have always been a significant issue at fires. There is no paperless system that is effective in tracking staff, vehicles, heavy plant, aircraft, etc. The RFS still use an antiquated ‘T card’ system to track vehicles whilst NPWS often use a whiteboard. More effective electronic systems for tracking of vehicles and individuals should be implemented as a matter of urgency. All operational persons from Divisional Commander (DC) above should have an iPad including RFS Group Captains and above. Rostering and deployment of staff is also often hard to maintain with the current systems. Logistics Officers struggle to keep a record of our firefighting assets, fire crews and their locations.

*“As a Div. comm or Operations Officer, one tool I would like is real-time tracking of all fire appliances on the fireground(s) from a tablet. This has to be live, allows me to see where appliances/ crews are without having to ask over radio, get grid references and work that out on a map for each of them. This is done for aircraft”.*

- Member, NPWS

FCNSW have for many years, effectively used tablets and iPads in fire operations. These have all the data layers and permits, the capture of on ground updates on fire behaviour, and rate of spread of fire. This information is relayed from the field to a server so that information gathered in the field is available for all Forestry staff including at the control centre.

Tracking devices are vital to monitoring the health and safety of firefighters relative to the fire-front, vehicles from other agencies, in relation to aircraft responses, and also in relation to finding or rescuing vehicles past the fire front.



## Mapping

The Association understands that mapping during the Black Summer bushfire season was of an extremely poor quality.

*“The mapping now in use by HQ is so clunky, that the majority of volunteers and staff use it only if required & fall back on paper maps or mapping generated from Google & then hand draw the important details onto it. The HQ mapping is unclear & often unreadable, especially for out of area crews. Road/trail names & other important details get lost in the overlain data, legends don't always match the symbols used on the maps etc etc”.*

- Member, RFS

Most of the maps available did not have enough resonance to read the topography or locate specific points on the map. RFS members noted that many of the maps were in fact blurred. The production of such maps requires much improvement. RFS members also indicated that technology and line speed for the mapping of fires and ‘Fires Near Me’ was not adequate.

## Recommendations – TOR 3

It is the overall recommendation of the Association and our members that:

The NSW Government increase the number of paid firefighters and fire management staff across all NSW fire combat agencies, including the NSW Rural Fire Service, the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service and Forestry Corporation of NSW in order to ensure that the State of NSW is best able to fight and prepare for future fire seasons.

In relation to TOR 3 of this inquiry, the Association further recommends that:

6. The NSW Government undertake a review of aircraft available for use at fires; that they are ‘fit for purpose’ with the view to ensuring that additional aircraft with RAFT (full name) crews are strategically located in the event of multiple lightning strikes in inaccessible terrain. And that the deployment of VLAT and LAT’s complies with Standard Operating Procedures including the use of a bird dog and Air Attack planes when airborne and that the IMT approves any deployment of such an aircraft to fire grounds under their responsibility. And that enough adequately trained and experienced staff are used to crew ALL aircraft and service them on the ground.
7. The RFS reviews its policy on winching crews from single engine aircraft at Section 44 emergencies. This will enable the use of a broader range of aircraft for winching at such fires.
8. The NSW Government conduct a review of combat agencies vehicle fleets to ensure that there are enough vehicles to manage bushfires. And that these vehicles are modern ‘fit for purpose’ and have all the latest safety features to protect fire fighters from danger.
9. The NSW Government undertake a review of the radio systems used by combat agencies with a view to be having a consistent approach to communications across the four agencies. And that consideration be given to a National system that will include the other States and territories that assist with fire control in NSW.
10. The NSW Government reviews systems currently used to track resources with a view to introducing one system that is consistent across all combat agencies.
11. The RFS and NPWS expedite the provision and use of iPads and tablets in firefighting to assist with the recording and transmission of information in a timely manner from the fire ground to other staff involved in the fire suppression effort.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Under-Prepared Part 3: Training

#### Response to

**Term of Reference 4: Any other matters that the inquiry deems appropriate in relation to bushfires.**

#### Training

*“...the service as a whole lost most battles that I was involved in through lack of resources or bad decisions from untrained staff”.*

- Member, NPWS

From the information collected from our members, the Association understands that the State of NSW was seriously undertrained going into the Black Summer fire season. The Association will use this TOR to address the issue of training.

There are currently different training streams and procedures depending on the agency you work for and what state you work in. This makes fire seasons such as the one just experienced, more difficult and hazardous for our combined NSW and interstate (and international) firefighting crews. Once again, a key word in terms of issues with training is consistency: each agency trains their firefighters differently and there is a lack of training standards for the State. As well as consistency, there was simply a lack of training conducted in the lead up to the catastrophic Black Summer fire season, as well as issues of access for certain staff. And finally, the staff resourcing issues laid out in Chapter Two severely impacted the number of trained staff on the field – experienced, trained staff have been eroded by every fire combat agency over recent years, and if they were replaced, it was with less experienced staff who consequently have not received adequate training to get them up to speed.

#### Inconsistency

*“There is a siloed situation amongst fire agencies and fire training and huge disparities in funding. Unfortunately, we are not doing well in the training, learning and sharing departments”.*

- Member, NPWS

*“Better integration across fire services will be required more often for mega fire events”.*

- Member, NPWS

Training appears to be inconsistently offered among fire-fighting agencies with different streams and terminology on offer.

Whilst the NSW Rural Fire Service managed major fires within Section 44 of the *Rural Fires Act 1997* (NSW), there were many occasions when the volunteer firefighters managing fire scenes experienced difficulties because of

their training and experience in managing multiple agencies attending to these fires or appropriate allocation of fire. There were often more experienced paid employees from RFS and other agencies who were being directed by inexperienced and untrained volunteers who had a gap in knowledge about processes and the local environment.

An example of the inconsistency in training across agencies can be found in the following input from an RFS member of the Association:

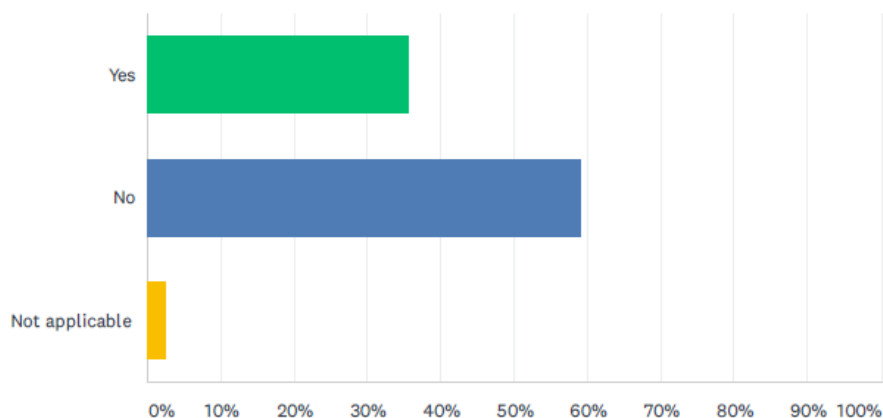
*“The NSW RFS also desperately requires an updated First Aid component. Training in emergency treatment of wounds causing catastrophic amputations and massive haemorrhage i.e. chainsaw injuries, crush injuries, car accidents etc is critical to mitigating loss of life. The RFS is years behind in providing relevant first aid training or equipment. NPWS provide tourniquets, Israeli bandages and blood stop agents as standard kit (and the relevant training in their use) to all chainsaw operators. Meanwhile the RFS provides nothing”.*

The issue of inconsistency has been exacerbated by the recent RFS restructure, which saw the regional ‘Learning and Development’ officers removed from the operational structure. These officers provided governance and oversight of training opportunities. The role was also fundamental for identifying training needs for staff; tailoring courses to suit staff and facilitating access to training courses.

### Training Standards/Quality

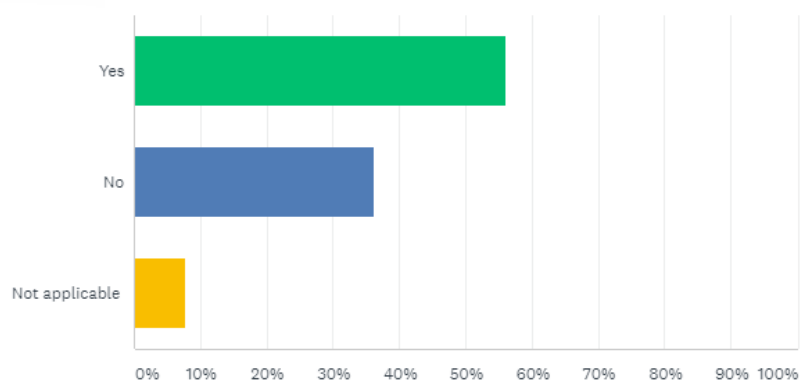
The training inconsistencies across agencies are further highlighted in the below graphs, which detail the survey data where we asked members in fire combat agencies whether the training provided to them was adequate. 91 per cent of FCNSW members said yes, while in NPWS 56 per cent said yes, 36 per cent said no and in RFS, a majority of 59 per cent said *no*, with 36 per cent saying yes.

Q22 Do you think that the current training provided by the NSW RFS is adequate, and at a level to equip staff with the correct knowledge and skills to deal with more challenging fire seasons?



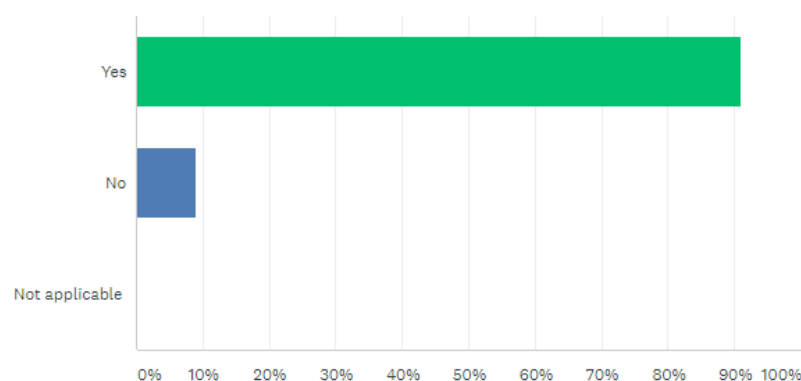
Do you think that the current fire training provided by the NPWS is adequate to equip staff with the correct knowledge and skills to deal with more challenging fire seasons?

Answers: 100%



Do you think that the current training provided by FCNSW is adequate, and at a level to equip staff with the correct knowledge and skills to deal with more challenging fire seasons?

Answers: 100%



Members in RFS and NPWS are particularly concerned about the standard of training being provided:

*“Many of our fire training packages are 20 years old and in dire need of review and updating”.*

- Member, NPWS

*“Too much philosophical class room training, not enough on the ground practical training with experienced mentors”.*

- Member, RFS

*“Fire training courses have been cut to save money and now don’t cover as much as they used to”.*

- Member, NPWS

*“NPWS does offer a lot of great, relevant training to a very high standard, but changes need to be made to training to make it more fit-for-purpose, realistic, & adapting to changes in technology etc. We need training using up-to-date technologies, simulation exercises etc.”.*

- Member, NPWS

*“The quality of IMT level training is poor. Other states and agencies run more in-depth and specialised training. e.g Situation officer training-sits under planning officer. However RFS deliver Planning officer training in a week without focusing in on specialised roles. There is no assessment during training. Staff are required to undertake the role to be assessed”.*

- Member, RFS

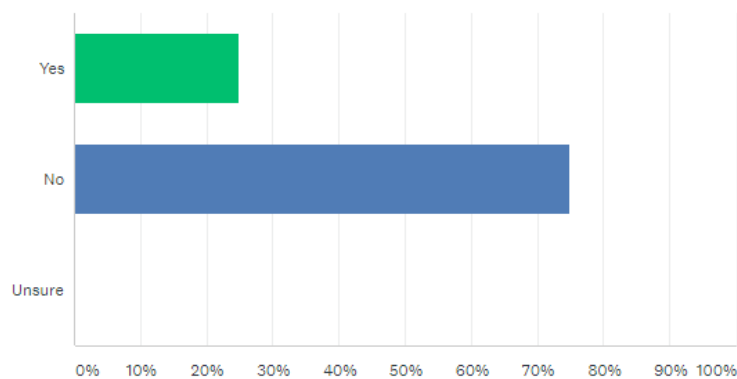
*“The training given by NPWS for IMT roles, functions or incident management exercises has been very poor over the last few years. It needs to be ramped up – practice will improve working/ relationships between agencies”.*

- Member, NPWS

The Association also asked its members in the State Emergency Service whether they felt that their training to deal with more challenging emergencies including bushfires was adequate. 75 per cent of respondents said no.

Do you think that the current training provided by the NSW SES is adequate, and at a level to equip staff with the correct knowledge and skills to deal with more challenging emergencies, including bushfires?

Answered: 4 Skipped: 0

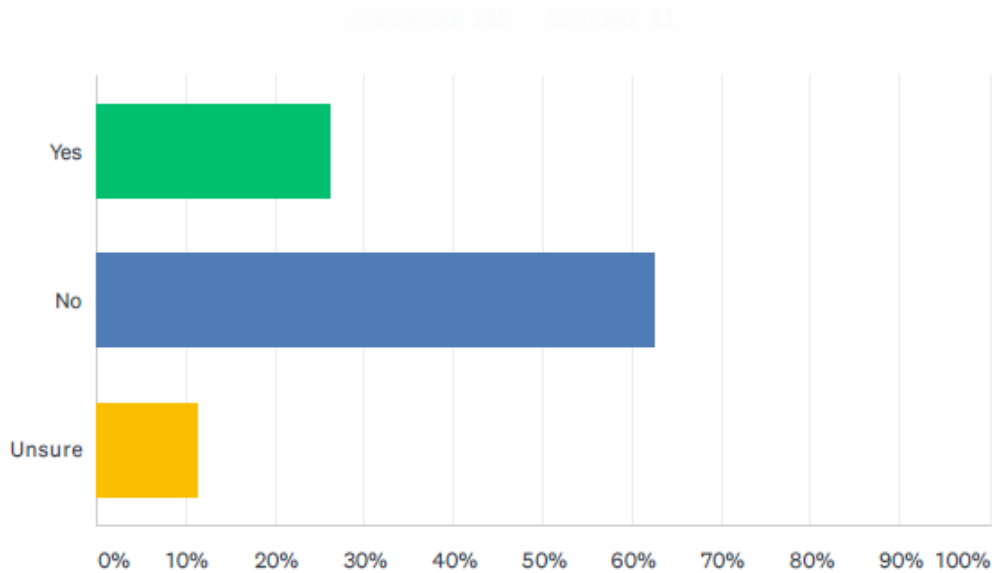


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Yes	25.00% 1
No	75.00% 3
Unsure	0.00% 0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>4</b>

Public Service Association (2020) Membership Survey – State Emergency Service

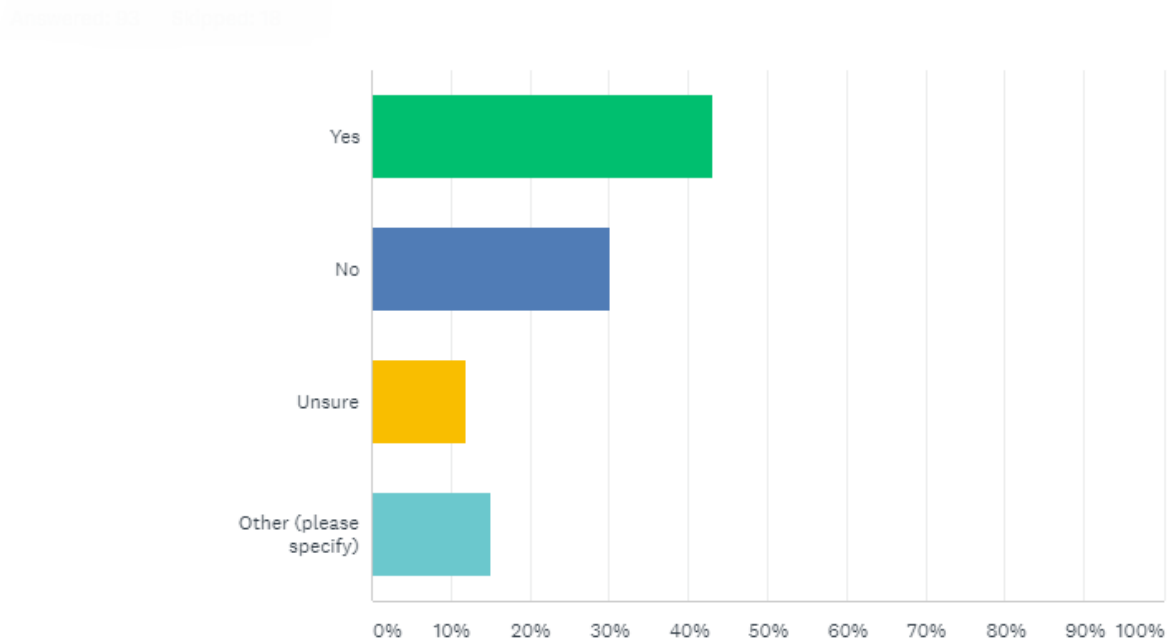
## Access and Opportunity

### Q23 Is fire training easily accessible to all NSW RFS staff?



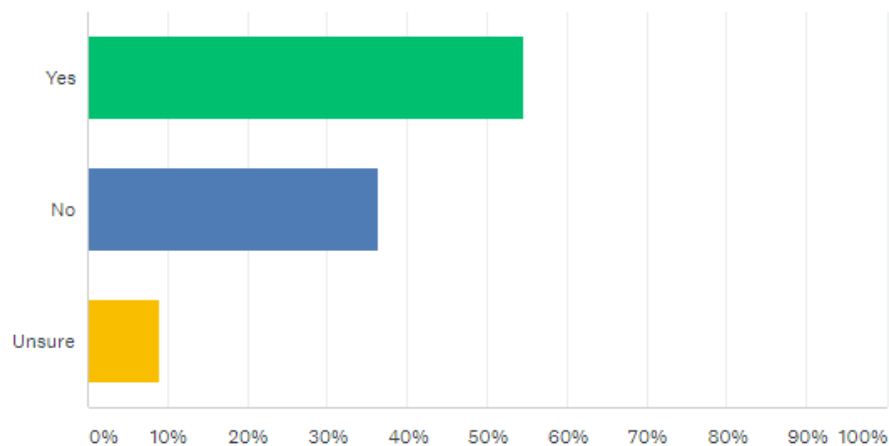
Public Service Association (2020) Membership Survey – Rural Fire Service

### Is fire training easily accessible to all NPWS staff?



Public Service Association (2020) Membership Survey – National Parks and Wildlife Service

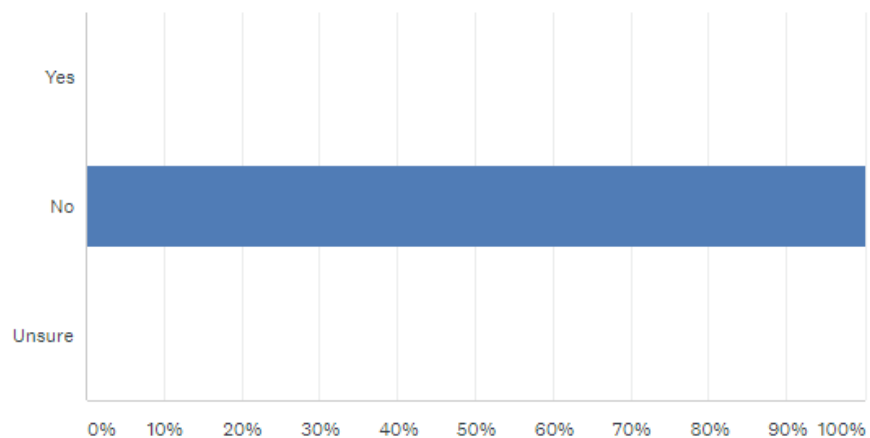
## Is fire training easily accessible to all FCNSW staff?



CPSU NSW (2020) Membership Survey – Forestry Corporation of NSW

## Is emergency training easily accessible to all NSW SES staff?

Answered: 4 Skipped: 0



Public Service Association (2020) Membership Survey – State Emergency Service

Opportunity and access to training is a major issue for staff across all fire combat agencies. The main barriers include the number of sessions offered, the availability of places in the sessions, travel restrictions to the training (eg distance, family commitments).

*“Lack of training run each year”.*

- Member, FCNSW

*“Limited by cost and availability”.*

- Member, RFS

*"The training is excellent, but opportunities to attend the training and then build up the required amount of practical experience to be given the accreditation is not adequate".*

- Member, FCNSW

*"Long distance to travel to training, no time to do post course work".*

- Member, RFS

*"It is often a week long course and we rarely get much notice. Opportunities don't come up too often, so sometimes it puts a real strain on family life".*

- Member, FCNSW

*"People miss training every year because of a lack of places/courses".*

- Member, NPWS

*"Generally requires attendance for 1 week (5 consecutive days) and travel to other regions. This can be restrictive to people with families".*

- Member, FCNSW

*"Timing can be difficult. There is often not enough courses especially for CM, CL, Div Comm".*

- Member, NPWS

*"Could be better if online and distance training was offered".*

- Member, RFS

Other barriers to accessing training are to do with management discretion and competing work priorities. The issue of understaffing also plays a role, as there are less staff to cover the workplace while staff are being trained.

*"Managers do not always send staff to training".*

- Member, FCNSW

*"RFS Staff are deterred from fire training as we are being told our positions are in an office not in the field, if we don't put our staff back in the field we will not fix our problems. Staff that are fire qualified are losing their fire skills due to the management style of keeping them inside an office, they have lost touch with what they expect of volunteers because they are not out there side by side with them".*

- Member, RFS

*"When offered but against all the other competing priorities and expectations of the job it is often overlooked".*

- Member, NPWS

*"Dependent on office work load and District Managers nominating staff for training".*

- Member, RFS



*“My impression is there are lots of course opportunities, but that they may not always be easily accessible to a workforce being pressured so hard to be productive without lost time, and insufficient staff to do the work while others are training”.*

- Member, NPWS

*“In my area it is, it all depends on who is organising it and who the boss is. There is a real issue with the management structure in FCNSW”.*

- Member, FCNSW

*“Held back by management who only want staff to have one stream of qualifications so they are not taken away from office duties”.*

- Member, RFS

*“A reluctance by managers to release staff to carryout fire training”.*

- Member, RFS

It would appear that in the RFS in particular, there is a lack of opportunity to access available training, with allegations from members in respect of a lack of equity when training opportunities are provided to staff.

*“As Mitigation Officer I have very few educational advancement opportunities. Even basic computer skills training has been withheld”.*

- Member, RFS

*“State Mitigation staff are continuously rejected from courses to allow volunteers onto courses, not that I have an issue with it completely however most SMS staff are volunteers as well. Training these staff would greatly increase the capacity of the NSW RFS two fold”.*

- Member, RFS

*“Many requests for training have been ignored. Fire Investigator course was abandoned by the course facilitators before anyone was assessed”.*

- Member, RFS

*“Unsure as I work in HQ and don't have to access fire training”.*

- Member, RFS

*“If you are an OpO you can get the majority of it, but if you are elsewhere it is virtually non-existent”.*

- Member, RFS

*“Since the introduction of the OpO programme, no opportunities for other staff or volunteers to undertake the training and the OpO people are only doing the courses to get a higher position rather than learning to do the job well or properly”.*

- Member, RFS

*"Brigade officers and Group Captains need to be trained and continue that training by updating etc."*

- Member, RFS

*"A high level of staff within the HQ office have no emergency service experience dealing with unfolding/threatening emergencies and respond to matters raised at District level in a slow or apathetic manner"*

- Member, RFS

Further, RFS respondents to the survey suggest that training is for a select cohort of staff only (by way of example some training courses are 'by invitation only'). Hence, some salaried staff are being denied the opportunity to undertake fireground training which is a prerequisite to higher level training to access IMT roles.

*"Most staff with the exception of those "chosen" have no access to training at any level"*

- Member, RFS

*"The RFS relies on a "chosen few" to undertake roles across the state. Broaden your organisations capability by expanding training opportunities to all staff, particularly those with expertise from other agencies"*

- Member, RFS

*"Selected courses for the chosen ones, operational officer program did have mandatory training, however it was generic, waste of time and not related to operational incidents"*

- Member, RFS

*"... favouritism does occur"*

- Member, RFS

*"... too many staff are "given" by senior staff mates, a free pass to higher quals [qualifications] without them having to do the hard yards to earn it. Puts people at risk when they are actually expected to perform at that level in these sort of emergencies. On the flip side, many fires were extended over a greater area, because new managers failed to recognise or take into account, the incredible local knowledge of older staff - who getting close to retirement have chosen to not update their quals eg the 3 Mile fire was only finally pulled up when the new FCO finally approached an older, long serving staff member who has successfully dealt with essentially the same fire on multiple occasions. Prior to "bending the knee" she had sidelined him as his quals weren't current. I've heard the same story from all over the state"*

- Member, RFS

It has also been stated that unless paid RFS staff are also registered as volunteers their chances of accessing training is minimal (we note around 70% of our RFS survey respondents are also RFS volunteers).

*"Unless you are a volunteer member of a Brigade, it is difficult to "Pass" firefighting training. Most training is done outside of normal work hours, meaning that if you attend you do so as a volunteer, or you may in some instances be approved for Local Arrangement time off"*

- Member, RFS

*“Staff need to join a brigade to learn firefighting. Other skills e.g. Incident Management, logistics etc. training is available to those interested”.*

- Member, RFS

*“Can be difficult for employees who are not volunteers”.*

- Member, RFS

*“[Training is accessible] only if you join a brigade and become a volunteer”.*

- Member, RFS

*“Staff should not be required to attend courses as volunteers to get qualifications”.*

- Member, RFS

These access to training issues, particularly for RFS staff are highly concerning. Some RFS staff have no fire ground experience or qualifications and are in operational positions making important decisions with regards to strategies and tactics when assigned to IMT's. Given the number of RFS staff who are also RFS volunteer firefighters, it is negligent of RFS to not provide full fire training to any RFS staff member who requests it.

All NSW fire combat agencies need more paid firefighters. It is in the best interests of both the NSW Government and the people of NSW for the existing staff of these agencies to be skilled-up in fire management and response.

### **Loss of skills and experience through job cuts and restructures**

As Chapter Two outlined, all fire combat agencies have undergone skilled and experienced staff erosions via restructures, chronic vacancies and job cuts. Experienced senior fire management staff have been made redundant or have left the agencies and have been replaced with lower graded staff or their positions have been deleted or have not been filled.

*“Under the restructure, a lot of district managers with a lot of practical and front line knowledge have been made redundant to allow for yes men to the hierarchy”.*

- Member, RFS

*“A number of staff members were placed into roles for which they are not qualified”.*

- Member, RFS

*“We had a very green IMT and we weren't afforded any help when we asked for it. Many of our staff weren't qualified in their roles and they weren't being used in the core skill sets”.*

- Member, RFS

*“NPWS training is very good, but there are not enough trained and experienced staff (due to restructure)”.*

- Member, NPWS

*“Yes but we are draining experience and not training enough people, often enough”.*

- Member, NPWS

*“Too many staff were thrown into roles well above their capabilities and capacity. Mainly due to not enough staff available for IMT over a very protracted fire season”.*

- Member, NPWS

The Association’s survey of members indicated that in the National Parks and Wildlife Service just over 5 per cent are trained Incident Controllers and only 5 per cent are trained Operations Officers. 22 per cent are trained Divisional Commanders. This is not through lack of interest of staff members but through lack of opportunity to obtain training and experience. Additional training is required to increase the number of staff proficient in performing IMT roles. Other non-operational staff in NPWS should also be considered for training and subsequent involvement in fire operations.

As was discussed in Chapter Two, the 2017 NPWS restructure reduced the number of staff with years of firefighting training and an increase in new field officer staff, many of whom did not have advanced levels of firefighting training and some were casual or temporary. Due to the challenging circumstances of the Black Summer fire season, there were many incidences where staff were forced to act up into roles that they were not trained for. This put their own lives, as well as the lives of their fellow crew members, at risk. Fire training in NPWS, as well as all fire combat agencies, needs to be co-ordinated centrally and new recruits should be trained before being deployed to a workplace. This is not currently occurring.

The NSW Government must increase the number of firefighters in in all fire combat agencies, and ensure that these firefighters are trained to the highest of standards.

## Trainers

*“NPWS rely on trainers from the ranks that have increased workloads and supervisors reluctant to release them to train”.*

- Member, NPWS

*“Training and systems deficient, no succession planning or training for staff during incidents, the same people every time take the same roles, experienced staff should be mentors and over sight to enable new staff to be unskilled, this would alleviate burn out”.*

- Member, RFS

Training is only one component of being an accredited and proficient firefighter. There is also a need for mentoring and peer review prior to a fire fighter in any agency taking on additional responsibilities on the fire ground.

It is apparent that due to the restructuring of RFS and NPWS many experienced trainers have left the agency hence trainers can be in short supply (particularly in the NPWS). Most fire trainers perform other full-time roles within their agencies. In NPWS, supervisors are often reluctant to release these trainers to undertake training courses as the Field Branches are so short staffed. Combined with this, cutbacks in the Registered Training Organisation (RTO) in Fire and Incident Management Branch (FIMB) of the NPWS has meant that RTO staff have had provided training (to an increased number of applicants) with less staff – this is untenable. Further, due to a staff freeze imposed by the NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment to assist with attaining efficiency dividends for the Government, these positions cannot be filled. The Association understands from its members that this has even meant not filling a position left vacant due to an employee passing away. Another member was encouraged by their manager to cancel their part-time work request (for caring responsibilities) because of the concern that the department would not approve a backfill request for the days the employee was away. The RTO in FIMB urgently requires the filling of all vacancies and additional support. More staff are

required to train both NPWS fire fighters and staff from other combat agencies that attend training organised by the RTO in FIMB – joint agency training and training each other’s staff has been in place since the start of the RTO. The RTO in FIMB plays a critical role in the success of the emergency services sector particularly the combat agencies operating in New South Wales.

## Types of Training Needed

### Property protection

There was a loud cry across our membership, particularly in NPWS, for further training in property protection. NPWS has traditionally focussed more on training its firefighters in bush firefighting, however the severity of the Black Summer bushfires, the failure of the NSW Government to properly staff its agencies and the consequent stretching of resources meant that NPWS firefighters were often being required for property protection in urban settings.

*“NPWS fire training has been shortened due to budget saving pressures. An example is the original Crew Leader training was reduced from two weeks to one week with the loss of the structural firefighting component. (NPWS crews did more structural fire work this season than any other)”.*

- Member, NPWS

*“We need more urban firefighting training as we are being asked to do more interface and property protection firefighting”.*

- Member, FCNSW

*“[NPWS staff were] completely out of our depth with private property protection which was something so many of us were called on to assist with”.*

- Member, NPWS

*“Training in Village firefighting required”.*

- Member, NPWS

*“Need to focus more on Property Protection for Field crews”.*

- Member, NPWS

*“NPWS fire fighters have no training in asset protection”.*

- Member, NPWS

*“We need training on property protection”.*

- Member, NPWS

*“We probably need more focus on dealing with structures (not entering buildings), but assessing "saveability", risks - eg power, chemicals in sheds, cranky animals, escape routes”.*

- Member, NPWS

*“NPWS needs better training and description in the Fire mgt manual as to what NPWS firefighters should be doing in relation to property protection. We were being sent to 000 calls for property protection this season without guidance on what was expected. It was only several months into the season that an Executive Director memo outlined that NPWS is not to be involved in structural firefighting inside a building”.*

- Member, NPWS

*“NPWS needs better tools to find properties. RFS uses a TomTom sat nav device that has all addresses loaded, so that when a 000 call comes in and says go to 1291 Gwydir Highway, they can search/ find it on this device and easily navigate to it. NPWS doesn’t have that ability. Google maps only works in areas of mobile phone coverage”.*

- Member, NPWS

### **Mega-fire training**

As Chapter One documented, climate change is increasing the severity of bushfires. One change has been the emergence of ‘megafires’<sup>58</sup>. The term ‘megafire’ has only entered into the vernacular of scientific research recently. It refers to a wildfire that is not just large but extreme in its behaviour with catastrophic impacts.<sup>58</sup>

Megafires occurred during the Black Summer bushfire season, including one on the NSW-Victorian border which involved the merging of three massive fires, which meant that the megafire then stretched from Kosciuszko National Park all the way to the Victorian banks of the Murray River.<sup>59</sup>

These fires are mammoth in size, and extremely difficult to control. Many members have commented on the fact that existing training programs are lacking in this area, and that specialised training in megafires is required in order to properly prepare for future fire seasons.

*“For firefighting on ground, but I think IMT training needs to be modified to cope with mega fires and how the IMT respond to tasking on ground crews”.*

- Member, NPWS

*“Severity of fires requires additional training”.*

- Member, NPWS

*“Our training [only] focuses on normal fire behaviour”.*

- Member, RFS

*“I understand more training is required on fire behaviour analysis, especially of pyro events, given fires have become increasingly intense”.*

- Member, RFS

*“Planning officers training has more of an operational (here and now) focus rather than the strategic level we will need to deal with the complexities of future fire seasons with more and more fire in the landscape.”*

- Member, RFS

<sup>58</sup> ABC Education (2014). ‘What is a megafire?’ <https://education.abc.net.au/home#!/media/2439907/what-is-a-megafire->

<sup>59</sup> Drevekovsy, J. (2020). ‘The mega blaze: how did it happen and what does it mean?’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 January, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/the-mega-blaze-how-did-it-happen-and-what-does-it-mean-20200111-p53qnr.html>

## **Dangerous tree management**

In addition to training in mega-fire response, members have also raised the need to be better trained in dangerous tree management, as well as the need to have paid staff who are experts in the area.

Managing dangerous trees during major bushfire events is an important yet extremely dangerous task. It requires highly trained and experienced staff to perform such a role. In the NPWS, RAFT crews usually require a 'Problem Tree Feller' in each team. Staff members tasked to perform this role not only identify dangerous trees that may compromise the safety of vehicles and crews but are also required to locate mark and/or fell trees that may have the potential to fall across tracks and trails and/or compromise the securing of a fire by falling across a containment line (hence reigniting and expanding a bushfire).

This role can be quite hazardous as such trees in question can often fall at any time (as they may be partly hollow and/or alight or partly burnt out by fire). Hence the need to have highly trained and experienced staff to perform the role. Unfortunately this training is time consuming; requires a specific level of ability and as such is costly. All NPWS front line firefighters are trained in 'cross cut' chainsaw and tree felling. A very small percentage of these fire fighters undertake further training to become problem tree fellers:

*"We need more problem tree fellers and they need a specific pay rate".*

- Member, NPWS

In the RFS a much smaller cohort of staff undertake basic chainsaw training and even fewer undertake tree felling and problem tree felling. Some volunteers are trained in the use of chainsaws. The RFS urgently requires both paid staff and volunteers to be better trained at all levels for the use of chainsaws and tree felling.

*"The NSW RFS is in desperate need of an increased number of chainsaw operators. Especially tree fellers. We also require a better training package to manage and understand the risk posed by dangerous trees. This training package needs to start with the most junior Basic Firefighters so all members understand the real risks posed by fire damaged trees and can spot and mitigate these common hazards".*

- Member, RFS

Due to the nature of their work the majority of Forestry Corporation front line fire fighters are trained in the use of chainsaws. The Corporation is well equipped to deal with the many challenges presented by felling trees at wildfires. All combat agencies should adopt a consistent approach to chainsaw training. This will enable better skilling of all front line fire fighters in the maintenance and safe use of chainsaws and tree felling at wildfires.

## **Off Road Vehicle Training**

Fighting bush fires can take crews down remote and poorly maintained fire trails, with risks of collapsing banks, falling rocks and trees. There is a strong commentary that volunteers should be further trained in driving in these more remote environments additional to obtaining just a heavy vehicle license.

*"We ran short of drivers - Organised Driver Skills maintenance - too many people being asked to drive extended distances or in terrain in which they have limited experience".*

- Member, RFS

## **Aviation**

Members in NPWS also identified a shortcoming in competently trained and experienced staff to operate such aircraft along with ground crews to support them. Consideration should be given to national accreditation for aviation staff and a forum should be developed for updating aviation staff on latest trends and developments in the industry.

## Recommendations – TOR 4

It is the overall recommendation of the Association and our members that:

The NSW Government increase the number of paid firefighters and fire management staff across all NSW fire combat agencies, including the NSW Rural Fire Service, the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service and Forestry Corporation of NSW in order to ensure that the State of NSW is best able to fight and prepare for future fire seasons.

In relation to TOR 4 of this inquiry, the Association further recommends that:

12. The bush firefighting training competencies be unified under one competency stream to allow for compatibility of procedures during multi agency firefighting, and that there are requirements placed on the agencies to have adequately trained people on board who have the required skills.
13. All fire combat agencies conduct an audit of access to and current fire training and implement a training regime based on equity and needs-based training for all staff that require such training to perform their fire duties.
14. The RFS and NPWS audit their training needs to ensure that properly trained and experienced staff can perform to a high standard when assigned to roles in Incident Management Teams.
15. The Federal Government set national standard for training and equipment and communications that the NSW Government comply with.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### Hazard Reduction

#### Response to

**Term of Reference 6: “Land use planning and management and building standards, including appropriate clearing and other hazard reduction, zoning, and any appropriate use of indigenous practices”.**

*“The game is changing and we need to keep up”.*

- Member, NPWS.

*“We need to get smarter”.*

- Member, RFS.

Hazard reduction burning has been the subject of much discussion and controversy for many years. As was briefly discussed in Chapter One, there are a range of barriers to performing these burns (most importantly resources and weather). Increasing hazard reduction burns will not save Australia from another catastrophic bushfire season. It is not the silver bullet; it is not the panacea.

As a National Parks and Wildlife Service ranger told *The Weekend Australian Magazine*:

*“There was nothing normal about these fires. Nothing was safe. The fires were destroying forests that had been cleared of ground fuel in controlled burns two years before”.*<sup>60</sup>

The Association is of the position that hazard reduction targets do not need to be increased but rather, we need to get smarter, more strategic, in reaching the existing targets and the best way to do this is with a paid workforce. If the existing targets are to be reached each year, then this needs to be met with an increased specialised workforce and resources to deliver increases in hazard reduction throughout the year.

Weather is one of the greatest barriers to performing hazard reduction and, as our climate changes, this is causing the window of opportunity to shrink even smaller. Furthermore, as Commissioner Fitzsimmons has said, the Black Summer fire season were so severe that hazard reduction burns did little to alleviate the spread of the catastrophic fires: “hazard reduction burns that are only two years old, we’re seeing these fires on these bad days just skip straight through it”.<sup>61</sup> And as a spokesperson for Emergency Services Minister Elliott has agreed, “the ability of the NSW RFS and partner agencies to complete hazard reduction burning is highly dependent on the weather, and the windows of opportunity available are limited”.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Bearup, G. (2020). ‘The Last Stand’, *The Weekend Australian Magazine*, 15-16 February.

<sup>61</sup> Hayman, R. (2020). ‘RFS Commissioner says hazard reduction burns made his organisation ‘public enemy number one’, *ABC News*, 8 January

<sup>62</sup> Smith, A., Barlass, T., Hannam, P. and Snow, D. (2019). ‘Farmers take fire fight to home turf’, *The Sydney Morning Herald* 16-17 November.

Furthermore, hazard reduction must cease being considered the magic solution to preventing the spread of bushfires. There is no single initiative that will solve this problem. Moreover, Price (2013) warned that “planned burning has little effect under catastrophic weather, so it is an uncertain form of protection.”<sup>63</sup> Penman et al (2019) noted that, “reduced fuel loads do little for bushfire mitigation under extreme fire weather and in times of drought”.<sup>64</sup>

*“The weather patterns and soil dryness were so extreme, I saw fire travel through bare paddocks where the only thing that burnt was dirt and kangaroo dung”.*

- Member, NPWS

*“[We need] to not look at hazard reduction as a single solution - needs to be considered as part of a larger picture - one of a number of measures to achieve resilience”.*

- Member, RFS

It is understandable why hazard reduction is so often turned to for criticism and critique after bad fire seasons: aside from big picture climate policy changes, it is often seen as the only tangible solution that people can do something about.<sup>65</sup> While the people of NSW watched the Black Summer bushfires burn out of control, it is natural that many turned to something that they assume is within human control.

Unfortunately, there has also been a significant amount of political debate and lot of finger pointing around hazard reduction and its role in bushfire control and prevention. Some that do not fully appreciate the complexities of fire management seek to proportion the blame on ‘green tape’ and environmental groups allegedly seeking to ban hazard reduction burns. NSW Deputy Premier John Barilaro has accused national park rangers of deliberately avoiding hazard reduction because they are “ideologically opposed” to it, while Agriculture Minister Adam Marshall has called for an increase in hazard reduction burns claiming that farmers are “fed up” with environmentalists trying to “lock up national parks to keep ‘pristine’ forest”.<sup>66</sup> The truth of the matter is that in the past decade, park managers have never been under such intense pressure to maintain hazard reduction burning to attain their “hectare KPIs” to meet targets set by the NPWS and Bushfire Management (see Dr Zylstra and Dr Griffin’s graph below).

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<sup>63</sup> Price, O. (2013). ‘Reducing bushfire risk: don’t forget the science’, *The Conversation*, 11 October, <https://theconversation.com/reducing-bushfire-risk-dont-forget-the-science-19065>

<sup>64</sup> Penman, T., Parkins, K. and McColl-Gausden, S. (2019), ‘A surprising answer to a hot question: controlled burns often fail to slow a bushfire’, *The Conversation*, 15 November, <https://theconversation.com/a-surprising-answer-to-a-hot-question-controlled-burns-often-fail-to-slow-a-bushfire-127022>

<sup>65</sup> ELCA’s full list of recommendations for the Federal Government. Excerpt from letter sent by Greg Mullins to David Littleproud, 29 November 2019, <https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/full-list-of-fire-and-emergency-chiefs-recommendations-to-federal-government/>

<sup>66</sup> Le Messurier, D. and Gellie, C. (2019). ‘We should have done more’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 12 November.

## HAZARD REDUCTION AREAS COMPLETED BY LAND TENURES VERSUS TARGET

Land tenure	Target (ha)	Completed HR Area (ha) by method				Completed vs target(%)
		Burning	Mechanical	Other	Total	
Australian Rail Track Corporation	292.2	93.35	62.21	0.00	155.56	53.2%
Catchment Authority	434.8	949.33	0.00	0.00	949.33	218.3%
Commonwealth	136.3	89.39	2.40	0.00	91.79	67.3%
Department of Primary Industries (Crown Lands)	2,783.5	1,404.33	2,378.32	11.19	3,793.84	136.3%
Local Government Authority	12,498.6	438.92	7,212.45	1,492.81	9,144.18	73.2%
NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service	135,000.0	136,157.37	1,588.59	17.55	137,763.51	102.0%
Other state Government land	2,733.8	6,856.25	44.29	0.00	6,900.54	252.4%
Private	11,145.4	4,469.75	1,716.77	0.00	6,186.52	55.5%
RailCorp	242.1	5.41	0.02	0.00	5.43	2.2%
Roads and Maritime Services	631.8	43.74	134.88	0.00	178.62	28.3%
Forestry Corporation of NSW	21,142.6	33,786.98	265.06	26.95	34,078.99	161.2%

Source: Rural Fire Service Annual Report 2018-19

## 1.2 Number of properties protected by hazard reduction works

### PROPERTIES PROTECTED BY AGENCY

	Target	Number of properties protected	Completed vs target (%)
Department of Primary Industries (Crown Lands)	18,854	21,146	112.2%
Local Government Authority	57,737	37,461	64.9%
NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service	16,852	22,282	132.2%
Other	1,384	854	61.7%
Forestry Corporation of NSW	1,297	1,476	113.8%
Fire and Rescue NSW	4,219	2,426	57.5%
NSW Rural Fire Service	48,450	27,485	56.7%

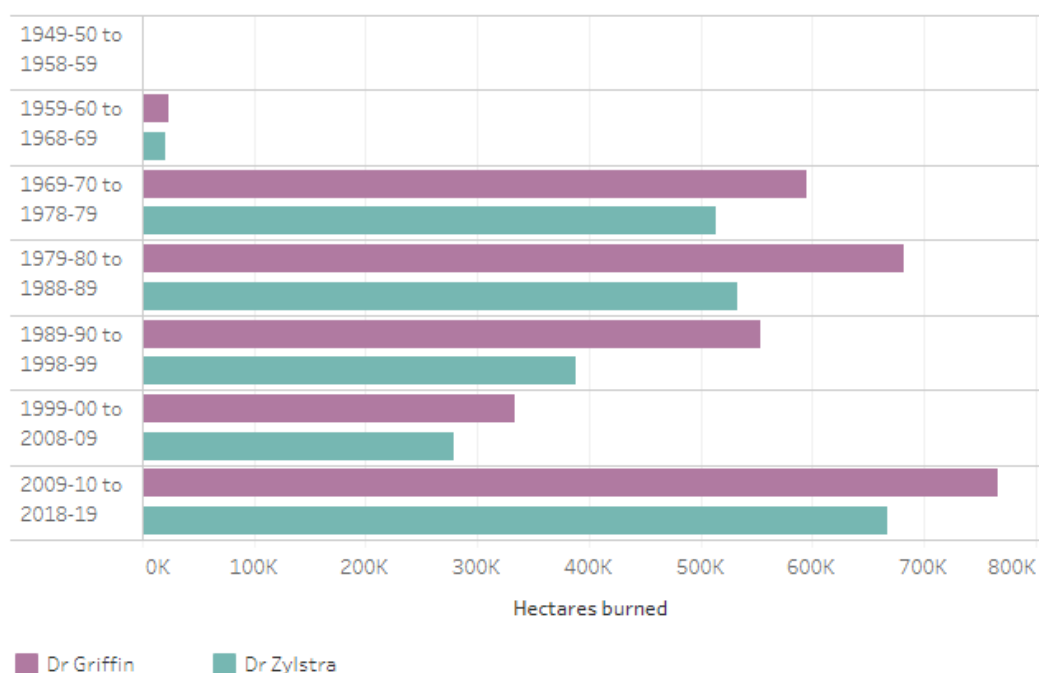
Source: Rural Fire Service Annual Report 2018-19

It is true that apart from the 2018-19 financial year, the NPWS has not met its annual hazard reduction target of 135,000ha, since 2016.<sup>67</sup> In 2012-13, the NPWS was involved in 208,000ha of hazard reduction burning; in 2016-

<sup>67</sup> Office of Environment and Heritage Annual Reports, various

17 that was just 88,136ha, and just 95,589ha in 2017-18.<sup>68</sup> However, as the above graphs demonstrate, NPWS exceeded both its hazard reduction area target and property protection target in 2018-19. Furthermore, according to RMIT ABC Fact Check, NSW has performed twice the amount of hazard reduction burning in national parks in this decade than in the decade prior.<sup>69</sup> As can be seen in the below graph, two separate analyses of the NPWS burning data have been conducted and while the figures were slightly different, the trend was the same: burning has increased significantly this decade.

### Calculations of total area subjected to prescribed burning in NSW national parks by 10-year period



Sources: Dr Philip Zylstra and Dr Amy Griffin using NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment data  
Credit: RMIT ABC Fact Check

It should also be pointed out that the argument to increase hazard reduction burns ignores the evidence across the board that says that the window of opportunity for hazard reduction burning is decreasing, and that this is already one of the primary reasons why less hazard reduction is being achieved.

There are of course some insufficiencies leading to why hazard reduction targets are not always being met. There are two reasons why. The first is the conditions in the field, where faced with warmer and drier weather as part of an ongoing drought, hazard reduction is not always possible.

*“The weather and climate have in our area been the biggest hurdle to undertaking burning with the limited windows of opportunities”.*

- Member, RFS

<sup>68</sup> Clennell, A. and Ritchie E. (2019). ‘Danger of cutbacks to rangers burns MP’, *The Australian*, 13 November.

<sup>69</sup> RMIT ABC Fact Check, (2020). ‘Has NSW seen more than twice the amount of prescribed burning in national parks this decade compared with the last?’ *ABC News*, 5 February, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-01-22/prescribed-burning-nsw-backburning-hazard-reduction/11878316?fbclid=IwAR1fcjPplkfXHlt5GX0uNGVuyL7VIWfaFINF3OPI75V06bc4vObgRztOq3s>

*“Suitable “window” of burning conditions have been very narrow reducing opportunities to implement burns. ie. weather conditions have limited burning”.*

- Member, FCNSW

The second reason hazard reduction may have not have been carried out is one entirely within the NSW Government’s control – resourcing. This issue has been thoroughly addressed in Chapter 2. The key argument in terms of resourcing is that it is no longer feasible to rely on volunteers to conduct hazard reduction burning. Given the narrowing window of opportunity and the need to be more strategic, hazard reduction burning should be the sole responsibility of paid professionals within the NSW Government. Volunteers have limited availability which is often seasonal due to other commitments and may have minimal training and experience.

*“HR needs to be finessed to ensure it protects/enhances plant and animal habitats while still saving valuable assets. This is more likely to happen if the practitioners are experienced and professional, and guided by sound science and policy.”*

- Member, FCNSW

Not reaching these targets are not to blame for the severity of the Black Summer bushfires. Hazard reduction is an effective tool in combatting regular bushfire seasons, but this summer was a clear demonstration that hazard reduction is not the single answer. True community preparedness is a shared responsibility between government and the community as set out below.

### **Community smoke concerns**

Another issue that can impact the state agency’s ability to meet their hazard reduction targets is community concerns about air quality from smoke pollution when smoke from prescribed burning drifts into populated areas. There is of course a genuine health risk when this occurs. Smoke from fires can increase mortality and hospitalisation rates.<sup>70</sup>

RFS Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons relied in this fact to respond to critics of the agency’s failure to meet hazard reduction targets when in prior years, community complaints about smoke from hazard reduction burns has made the RFS as well as other land management agencies, including NPWS and Forestry Corporation, “public enemy number one”.<sup>71</sup>

It could be argued that the Black Summer bushfire season may ultimately shift public perception of smoke from hazard reduction burns, given that large parts of the State, including city centres, were blanketed in thick smoke from raging out-of-control fires for weeks, if not months, on end. Surely the smoke incurred from hazard reduction burning will now be seen as the lesser and necessary risk. The NSW Government should do everything it can to inform the public on this issue. As one NPWS member has said:

*“People may need to accept smoke during HRBs as it is far worse in wildfires when the [area] is blanketed by smoke for 3-4 months”.*

### **Hazard reduction on private property**

The people of NSW must to some extent accept that people living in Bush Fire Prone Areas will continue to be at risk, no matter what efforts are made to reduce that risk. As academics from the University of Melbourne have said, “the only way to eliminate risk entirely is to move the houses away from vegetation altogether”.<sup>72</sup> And as a NPWS member has reflected:

<sup>70</sup> Penman, T., Parkins, K. and McColl-Gausden, S. (2019), ‘A surprising answer to a hot question: controlled burns often fail to slow a bushfire’, *The Conversation*, 15 November, <https://theconversation.com/a-surprising-answer-to-a-hot-question-controlled-burns-often-fail-to-slow-a-bushfire-127022>

<sup>71</sup> Hayman, R. (2020). ‘RFS Commissioner says hazard reduction burns made his organisation ‘public enemy number one’, *ABC News*, 8 January

<sup>72</sup> Price, O. (2013). ‘Reducing bushfire risk: don’t forget the science’, *The Conversation*, 11 October, <https://theconversation.com/reducing-bushfire-risk-dont-forget-the-science-19065>

*“There is a simple message which needs to be spread – if you live in or near the bush, you need to expect a bushfire at some stage – bush burns”.*

In particular, communities must accept that hazard reduction will not eliminate the risk, as experts have warned that simply performing more hazard reduction burns will not prevent catastrophic bushfires.<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, research demonstrates that hazard reduction activities around assets provide the ‘best bang for buck’ by reducing fuel loads directly adjacent to assets.<sup>74</sup> This aids in reducing direct flame contact and radiant heat to assets and fire fighters. An analysis of property loss in the catastrophic 2009 Victorian bushfires showed that there was no difference between being adjacent to state forest and being adjacent to a national park, despite the higher level of fuel control in the former.<sup>75</sup>

The evidence indicates that the best way to mitigate risk for properties is to simply reduce the hazards immediately surrounding the property. However, this does not mean that mitigation work should be left to property owners. Those that call for an unregulated approach for private land owners to burn their properties as they see fit ignore one inconvenient fact – approximately 85 per cent of fires are man-made with 35 per cent of these being accidental.<sup>76</sup> An attempt by a land owner to mitigate a risk on their own property can often result in a threat to many others if not properly managed.<sup>77</sup> The NSW Government must ensure that private property owners are properly informed and supported in terms of mitigation on their land.

### **Project Guardian (RFS)**

The Association and its members are concerned with the ongoing delays of the RFS’s Project Guardian, which is an important tool in protecting lives and property from bushfires in NSW.

Project Guardian is a collection of software modules which are designed to replace a number of aging electronic and paper based systems. Guardian when completed will be a one stop shop for the community to see what mitigation measures are happening in their community, apply for fire permits and hazard reduction certificates. The Guardian project is supposed to improve community resilience and risk mitigation measures by increasing community awareness of bush fire preparedness. The modules within Project Guardian include: Referred Development Applications, Fire Permits, Hazard Reduction, Hazard Complaints, Bushfire Management Committee, and Community Education.

Funding for Project Guardian was announced in 2015 with \$5.2 million being allocated to the creation of an online portal for landowners to access information about bushfire risk and mitigation,<sup>78</sup> and was initially slated for release on 30 June 2017.<sup>79</sup>

Due do “unforeseen external delays”, delivery of Project Guardian was delayed until the 2017-2018 financial year.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Foley, M. (2020). ‘Benefits of burnbacks undercut by weather, costs’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 January

<sup>74</sup> Price, O. (2013). ‘Reducing bushfire risk: don’t forget the science’, *The Conversation*, 11 October, <https://theconversation.com/reducing-bushfire-risk-dont-forget-the-science-19065>

<sup>75</sup> Kirkpatrick, J. (2013). ‘Does fuel reduction burning help prevent damage from fires?’, *The Conversation*, 21 January, <https://theconversation.com/does-fuel-reduction-burning-help-prevent-damage-from-fires-11600>

<sup>76</sup> 2008. *Proportion of deliberate bushfires in Australia*. Bushfire arson bulletin no. 51. Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology. <https://aic.gov.au/publications/bfab/bfab051>

<sup>77</sup> Smith, A., Barlass, T., Hannam, P. and Snow, D. (2019). ‘Farmers take fire fight to home turf’, *The Sydney Morning Herald* 16-17 November.

<sup>78</sup> Danks, K. (2015), ‘More than \$1 Billion to Support Emergency Services and Build Community Resilience’, *NSW Government Budget 2015-2016: Building Our Future*, 23 June, [https://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0015/32811/Budget-Minister-Elliott-More-than-\\$1-billion-to-support-emergency-services-and-build-community-resilience.pdf](https://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0015/32811/Budget-Minister-Elliott-More-than-$1-billion-to-support-emergency-services-and-build-community-resilience.pdf)

<sup>79</sup> NSW Rural Fire Service, ‘NSW Rural Fire Service: Annual Report 2015/2016’, p55

<sup>80</sup> NSW Rural Fire Service, ‘NSW Rural Fire Service: Annual Report 2016/2017’, p62

Further delays occurred when the projected release date of 'Guardian – Release 1' (a version of Project Guardian containing 80% functionality) was rescheduled from February 2019 to September 2019, due to "many setbacks".<sup>81</sup>

To date, the Association understands that only the Referred Development Applications module has been released and a second module, Hazard Reduction, is scheduled for release in June 2020.

### **Strategic planning and alternatives to hazard reduction burning**

In NSW, local Bush Fire Management Committees (BFMC) who are comprised of Fire Agencies and major land owners/managers, have the legislated responsibility of assessing risks, developing mitigation strategies and the prioritisation of implementing mitigation measures, this includes hazard reduction burning. The process of developing a Bush Fire Risk Management Plan is complex and involves input from all BFMC members to ensure all local knowledge is captured. Hazard Reduction burns that are identified as a treatment option within the Bush Fire Risk Management Plan are very strategic and have a specific purpose of protecting an asset or multiple assets.

Having this approach ensures that there is a coordination of effort and resources across multiple tenures. The Association supports this legislative framework as it ensures strategic planning occurs with regard to the finite resources and compressed timeframes for hazard reduction burning.

Taking the above into account, agencies must become even more strategic with implementing hazard reduction burns focussing on those that have been identified through the Bush Fire Risk Management. A community engagement process should be undertaken to increase the community understanding of hazard reduction burning, demonstrating that the primary focus is on protecting life, property and the environment. The following section outlines how NSW public agencies can improve hazard reduction outcomes. This includes taking steps already addressed, such as increasing staffing levels in the relevant agencies and ensuring that private property owners are properly supported in the mitigation of risk around their properties.

There are a number of other steps that can be taken. Further consideration should be given to the use of mechanical clearing particularly creating Asset Protection Zones (fuel reduced areas around homes and assets) and the utilisation of Aboriginal cultural burning practices, both of which will be discussed in the following sections. Other suggestions provided by our members include:

- Listening to the experts

*"Needs the input of experts... who have studied hazard reduction and understand its benefits and limitations. Also, needs input from experts in the field of indigenous burning, and smoke impact on people. Needs a complete review of our approach to HR and it needs to be based on science and not emotion".*

- Member, RFS

*"NSW is always guided by the experts. It's not for politicians to decide how we manage HR or back burning operations".<sup>82</sup>*

- Gladys Berejiklian,  
Premier of NSW

- Reviewing the Bush Fire Environmental Assessment Code

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<sup>81</sup> NSW Rural Fire Service, 'NSW Rural Fire Service: Annual Report 2017/2018', p63; NSW Rural Fire Service, 'NSW Rural Fire Service: Annual Report 2018/2019', p54

<sup>82</sup> Kehoe, J. (2020). 'NSW will follow 'experts', not Morrison: Premier', *The Australian Financial Review*, 16 January

*“The review of the Bush Fire Environmental Assessment Code has been going on for years but is still in Draft. This needs to again be reviewed in light of current climate situation”.*

- Member, RFS

*“The new 2019 / 2020 (BFEAC) Bush Fire Environmental Assessment Code restricts our ability to carry out Hazard Reduction. It needs to be amended!!!!”*

- Member, RFS

- Review current targets and processes including frequency of burns and focus on number of hectares burnt.

*Get rid of the stupid hectares KPI for our hazard reduction programs. They are fundamentally anti-nature conservation. Replace it with a smarter, strategic area burn plans next to assets. Much smaller and more effective”.*

- Member, NPWS

*“Our Branch exceeded its Hazard Reduction quota in 2019/20. The current hectares-based model is completely inadequate in terms of asset protection and needs to be dropped”.*

- Member, NPWS

*“Also the fire frequency thresholds needs to be reviewed to allow more frequent low intensity hazard reductions. The fire frequency thresholds are a set amount of years between fires for certain vegetation types. These can be long allowing ground fuels and hazards to build up again between hazard reductions”.*

- Member, RFS

### **Mechanical clearing**

Mechanical clearing has already been adopted by FCNSW to protect their softwood plantations; primary producers to protect pastures; catchment managers to protect catchment lands (and hence maintain water quality) and other private property owners to protect their assets. Members across NPWS, RFS and FCNSW have called for more use of the mechanical clearing method, as this presents less risk than the burning method, and is also not as severely limited by the weather.

*“The RFS need to purchase plant (e.g. tractors slashers, skid steer Bobcats) to undertake mechanical hazard reduction. Don't rely on councils or contractors to undertake the work”.*

- Member, RFS

*“Hazard Reduction [burning] is not the answer, there is such a small window of opportunity... Mechanical clearing is the preferred method”.*

- Member, RFS

### **Cultural burning**

***The following section was written in collaboration with an Aboriginal member of the Association.***



Fire is a key component to maintain a healthy landscape to enhance native vegetation and biodiversity through cultural fire application. The key is to be able to read country, country tells the story for when it is ready for fire and when it is not. Traditional knowledge talks about healthy country equals healthy people and the country can only be healthy if it is managed with the right fire.

Within traditional knowledge it is against traditional lore for fire to be in the canopy, if it's up there it's too hot, "cool fire is the good fire". The other aspect of cool fire is to ensure Aboriginal history and cultural values are protected from the threat of wildfire. These sites are significant evidence of aboriginal occupation in what is now a highly modified agricultural landscape. These teachings are essential for young aboriginal people to continue with their cultural burning practices.

There are employment and training opportunities that empower aboriginal people to care for their country like their Elders have done for millennia. Aboriginal people are connected to their country and have a strong desire to care for it. The opportunity to officially recognise cultural burning practices will increase the amount of young aboriginal people being back on country, leading to an increase of healthy country and healthy people.

Fire is culturally significant to Traditional Custodians. Where traditional owners have not been able to continue these practices the depth of spiritual and cultural knowledge and connection to country is only maintained through stories and memories. Integration of this knowledge into current agency practices should be actively promoted and supported.

Where knowledge gaps exist, agencies should work with traditional Owners to build that knowledge and where appropriate, revive cultural fire practices.

Land managers and fire agencies alike have recognized the use of cultural burning for 'ecological burns' and the protection of both built and natural assets. One reason why cultural burning has not been widely adopted for hazard reduction purposes is that the traditional knowledge is not widely recognised or understood by fire agencies.

Adopting the principles of Aboriginal cultural burning is an important potential strategy to improve fire management and biodiversity outcomes across Australia. It will increase Aboriginal participation in broader land management, restoring key traditional values such as increasing the health of country and people.

## Recommendations – TOR 6

It is the overall recommendation of the Association and our members that:

The NSW Government increase the number of paid firefighters and fire management staff across all NSW fire combat agencies, including the NSW Rural Fire Service, the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service and Forestry Corporation of NSW in order to ensure that the State of NSW is best able to fight and prepare for future fire seasons.

In relation to TOR 6 of this Inquiry, the Association further recommends that:

16. The NSW Government review hazard reduction burn targets with a view to ensuring that KPI's do not focus entirely on number of hectares burnt. And that consideration is given to smaller strategic burns and also mechanical clearing that better target asset protection.
17. The RFS provide reasons for the ongoing delays of Project Guardian; the anticipated date for completion of Project Guardian; the total amount spent of Project Guardian to date; and the projected cost of Project Guardian at completion.

18. The fire agencies continue to engage with the Aboriginal Community in relation to cultural burning and suitable strategies for the protection of aboriginal cultural heritage; and that agencies further investigate and quantify the outcomes of cultural burning practices on built, natural and cultural assets.
19. The NSW Government should allocate additional adequate resources to combat agencies for paid and trained professional staff to undertake hazard reduction.

## CHAPTER SIX

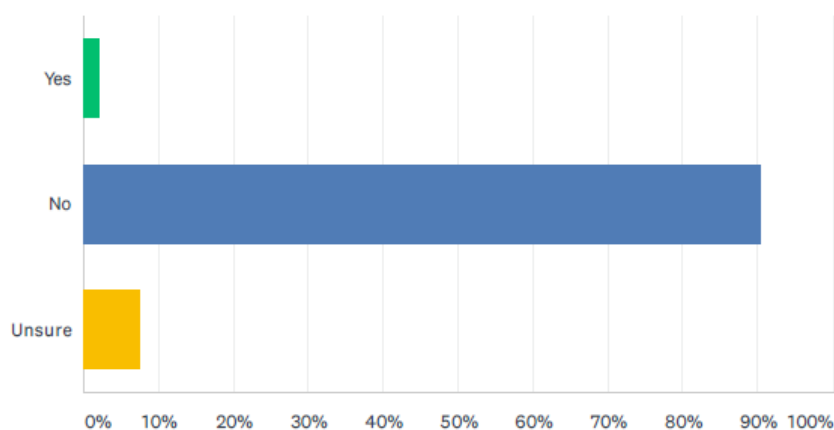
### Ecosystems

#### Response to Term of Reference 7: Appropriate action to adapt to future bushfire risks to communities and ecosystems.

A staggering 2.7 million hectares, or 37 per cent, of NSW National Park was burnt during the 2019-20 Black Summer bushfires.<sup>83</sup> The fires hit the habitat of 84 of the State's most vulnerable animals, while 46 threatened plant species had more than 90 per cent of their recorded range in fire zones.<sup>84</sup> The wildlife losses that resulted from these fires are devastating. If the State government does not act now, many species will never recover and will certainly be ill-equipped to survive any future catastrophic fire seasons.

The NSW Government is not currently equipped to deal with the wildlife crisis. The Association asked its members in NPWS whether they believed that the agency had the necessary level of resources to protect and assist in the recovery of NSW wildlife and the regeneration of their habitat. **90 per cent said no.** Only 2 per cent said yes.

Q15 In your opinion, does NPWS currently have the necessary level of resources to protect and assist in the recovery of our wildlife and the regeneration of their habitat?



Public Service Association (2020) Membership Survey – National Parks and Wildlife Service

<sup>83</sup> NSW Parliament, (2020). 'Portfolio Committee No. 7 – Planning and Environment: Energy and Environment' Estimates Hearing uncorrected transcript, 6 March

<sup>84</sup> Hannam, P. (2020). 'Grub and guns to save species on edge of extinction', *The Sun-Herald*, 2 February

NPWS Members added to their answers to this question, which included comments such as:

*“Grossly inadequate”.*

*“Nowhere near enough resources”.*

*“NPWS is a dismal failure to actively assist with immediate wildlife rescue and or recovery”.*

*“Not anywhere near adequately prepared or resourced to undertake the recovery work required as resources and knowledge have been progressively stripped away”.*

The changing climate is having a severe impact on our biodiversity, threatened species and broader ecosystems. The diminishing window to undertake hazard reduction burns is reducing the ability to protect native flora and fauna from bushfire events, which puts them in even greater danger in the event of a protracted and catastrophic fire season, as was experienced during the Black Summer fires. Our biodiversity is at high risk of significantly reduced species diversity.

In this most recent fire season even sub-tropical rainforests on the far north coast were decimated by fire for the first time. In the past, moist rainforest gullies acted as fire advantages to protect the spread of fire across the landscape. These ecosystems (along with many others) were almost completely destroyed by the spread of wildfire across the landscape of the far north coast and northern tablelands during this past fire season.

However, as this submission continues to put forward, in spite of predictive modelling that forecast such an extremely harsh fire season for 2019/20 the NSW Government rather than ‘gearing up’ the combat agencies for the significant threat this posed, instead continued to cut land management and combat agency resources.

In NPWS, restructures prior to the one that took place in 2017-18 removed many of the scientists from the agency and any remaining scientific staff were placed in other sections of a larger agency effectively siloing them from staff who undertook work to protect and manage flora and fauna; biodiversity and ecosystems both on and off park.

More recently this was exacerbated with the establishment of the Biodiversity and Conservation Division (BCD) which was removed from NPWS and placed in a different part of the larger agency that is the Department of Planning, Industry and Environment (DPIE). This further siloed this division from the Save our Species staff in the NPWS section of DPIE tasked to protect threatened species across NSW. The Association understands that there is little connectivity between the two sections of DPIE. Furthermore, whilst specifically designed to manage protected flora and fauna both on and off park, BCD has no role to play in fire management.

Given the extent of devastation the Black Summer bushfires wreaked on the flora and fauna of NSW, fire must be recognised as a major threat to our threatened species. A further symptom of the separation of BCD from NPWS is that the database which was managed to record threatened species is no longer maintained. Staff who were assigned to survey, map and record the range of threatened species in NSW no longer exist in DPIE. These staff informed fire managers and planners of the existence of threatened species on the fire ground and across the broader landscape. This enabled fire planners to assist with and inform strategies for controlling major bushfires whilst protecting biodiversity and ecosystems.

Ecosystem management and policy in the NSW government is disparate and lacks cohesiveness. A range of staff who protect and manage ecosystems are spread across DPIE and other agencies, and there is a lack of communication and coordination across the various areas. This inevitably complicates the ability of staff to inform officers involved in fire management.

Further to this, funding for the management of a range of threats including fire, vertebrate pests and weeds comes from a range of sources and other unrelated agencies. Preparing grant applications and bidding processes for small amounts of funds is both time consuming, ineffective and inefficient. Officers who are tasked to undertake ecosystem protection and management spend a significant proportion of their time applying for these

funds. As such the biodiversity and threatened species staff spread across a range of agencies (who should be informing fire management) struggle to assist the NPWS with fire strategies and fire management.

## Recommendations – TOR 7

It is the overall recommendation of the Association and our members that:

The NSW Government increase the number of paid firefighters and fire management staff across all NSW fire combat agencies, including the NSW Rural Fire Service, the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service and Forestry Corporation of NSW in order to ensure that the State of NSW is best able to fight and prepare for future fire seasons.

In relation to TOR 7 of this inquiry, the Association further recommends that:

20. The NSW Government undertake a review of how ecosystems are managed and protected across the broader landscape of NSW to ensure that a more streamlined approach is adopted to enable actions to be implemented to better protect and manage ecosystems in the event of fires.
21. The NSW Government through the above review considers incorporating all aspects of ecosystem management across NSW within the NPWS. And that adequate resources are applied to NPWS to better manage and protect ecosystems across the landscape from fire.
22. The NSW Government considers the re-establishment of the NPWS as a 'stand-alone' agency so that the agency is strengthened in its power to manage and protect ecosystems.
23. NPWS hire a team of qualified ecologists to manage ecosystem management and wildlife protection across NSW.
24. Suitably qualified and trained officers are recruited to assist with the maintenance of a database that informs fire managers in respect of threatened species and ecosystems that require protection from both hazard reduction burns and the impacts of wildfires.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Non-Combat Agencies' Response

#### Response to

#### **Term of Reference 8: Emergency responses to bushfires, including overall human and capital resourcing.**

While this submission deals largely with the direct combat agencies, it is important to acknowledge the public agencies who work both behind the scenes and in the recovery response to the Black Summer bushfires. This includes operational staff at NSW Police Radio, emergency response staff at the State Emergency Service, the Office of Emergency Management, staff in the Department of Communities and Justice including Community Services, Housing and Corrective Services.

The work that these workers did during the bushfire crisis whilst not applauded publicly, was exceptional and the Association recommends that these dedicated loyal public servants be recognised by way of a special public service medal for their contributions during the bushfire season.

The Association reached out to our members in these areas, asking them to share their stories of what they experienced working on the response and recovery to the Black Summer bushfires. There is a common thread among all of them: the under-preparedness of their agencies, and therefore of the NSW Government. This submission has comprehensively demonstrated the under-preparedness of the NSW fire combat agencies. It is therefore no surprise that a common thread in the stories of our members in the other support agencies was also of under-preparedness. One member from the Department of Communities and Justice reflected:

*“Every time we have raised an issue about the bushfire response we have been told it was ‘unprecedented.’ This seems to have become a word to cover up the word ‘incompetent’”.*

#### **NSW Police Radio (VKG)**

The Association has been advised by our members in VKG that the NSW Police Force failed to properly prepare them for the Black Summer bushfire crisis. Not only did this cause great strain and distress to the staff in these centres, it also endangered the communities who were relying on their essential service.

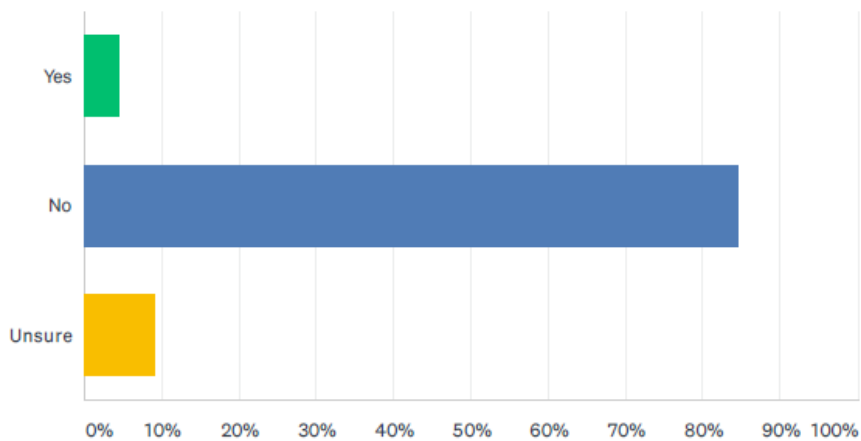
*“[There was] understaffing during [the] bushfire period - I consider this a massive safety risk not only to the public/NSW Police Officers but also VKG Radio Operators”.*

- Member, VKG

The vast majority of police dispatch in NSW is performed by civilian operators, who coordinate the logistics of police resources including car crews from local commands, Police Airwing, Police Rescue, and the Dog Unit, as well as liaise with the other emergency services agencies in NSW.

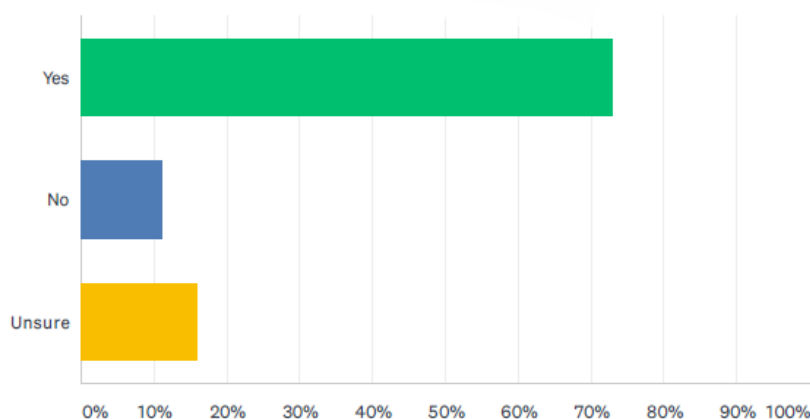
Like the combat agencies, the greatest failure of NSW Police, in terms of VKG during the fires, was a lack of staffing, although for VKG this was more a rostering issue than an overall resourcing issue.

### Q14 In your opinion, was proper planning conducted at your centre (including ensuring adequate staffing levels) ahead of forecast major weather events and fire conditions this season?



Public Service Association (2020) Membership Survey – NSW Police Radio (VKG)

### Q18 Overall, do you think inadequate staffing levels impacted operational policing during this summer's bushfire crisis?



Public Service Association (2020) Membership Survey – NSW Police Radio (VKG)

According to our members, in general, NSW Police base their staffing numbers on the minimum requirements, and are reluctant to listen to emergency warnings that predict an increase in required numbers of police and therefore an increase in required number of civilian staff, including within VKG.

*"[In response to complaining to management re: staffing levels] Got gas-lighted. Was told it wasn't as bad as we were imagining".*

- Member, VKG

*"We started that shift short staffed, everyone knew it was going to be a catastrophic day".*

- Member, VKG

In the past, each police radio coverage area of NSW was coordinated by two radio operators – the main despatcher, and a communications officer (“despatch assist”) to assist them. In the last ten years, police radio channels have been “merged” regularly, to cut down on staffing costs. This has resulted in radio operators being in charge of coordinating larger areas, meaning that they are also responsible for assisting more police officers. This set up completely falls apart in a large emergency situation, as was the case during the Black Summer bushfires. For example, during the 2019-20 Taree and Cessnock fires, the radio areas were merged into one, causing mayhem with police officers attempting to call for urgent assistance in the field, with not enough radio operators to take their calls. Even as the recent crisis unfolded, NSW Police in some situations refused to listen to staff alerts of the issue:

*"I am aware concerns were passed from team leader to centre coordinator and commander with no result. Commander couldn't even bring his face into the studio to see what was happening".*

- Member, VKG

The Association has consistently raised this issue with NSW Police, to no avail and ran an unsuccessful dispute in 2014 to attempt to mitigate the merging.

It should be noted that during the Black Summer bushfires, the centres most badly affected by work overload and lack of staffing were eventually provided with additional resources. However, not before the damage, particularly to the staff themselves, had been done. Numerous radio operators are now claiming workers’ compensation for stress or PTSD due to their experiences working during the bushfire crisis. A majority of these claims are directly linked to the staffing issues within VKG centres. For example, 25 per cent of the VKG staff who worked the shift on 31 December 2019 at Oak Flats subsequently put in workers’ compensation claims. Some have still not returned to work.

NSW Police must address the rostering issue within VKG. As this submission has consistently stated, the changing climate will continue to bring extreme weather conditions – both for bushfires and other natural disasters – and all public services involved in emergency services need to be properly resourced at all times in preparation for a catastrophic bush fire season. As a member has said:

*"The mentality of 'you can't roster for a plane crash' needs to change. The bushfires, their paths, the weather, all were known and protracted - there was no excuse not to have adequate staffing while this crisis was occurring".*

- Member, VKG

## **Office of Emergency Management**

The Office of Emergency Management (OEM) within Services NSW plays a critical role during bushfire emergencies. This role includes (but is not limited to):

- Coordinating the establishment and operation of evacuation centres across the State;
- Working with local councils on recovery response;



- Facilitating the flow of funding for disaster assistance programs;
- Facilitating effective community and media engagement around disaster recovery;
- Providing critical information directly to government ministers; and,
- Operating the State Emergency Operations Centre.

An OEM member of the Association has reflected that the increase in severe weather events has meant that OEM staff workloads are increasingly under strain and that the Black Summer bushfires exacerbated this strain:

*“...though the bushfire crisis reached its peak around Christmas and New Year, OEM has actually been on an intense operational footing since early September 2019, when the first bushfires in Northern NSW started. Since September, the bushfire crisis continued into December and January, and it didn’t really come to an end until mid-February. OEM’s work will continue well beyond the end of the fires, as there were thousands of households who lost their homes and billions of dollars in damage that occurred to public infrastructure and businesses. Addressing these impacts are all part of OEM’s work. This long bushfire season came shortly after significant bushfires in February 2019, significant storms in late 2018 and a steady stream of smaller but significant bushfire events in the years earlier (Sir Ivan fire, Tathra fire etc). Over the last few years, there has been very little time between significant disaster events, and this succession of disasters has placed significant demands on the organisation, with last summer’s fires being the peak of this build-up”.*

- Member, OEM

*“It seems that disaster welfare is becoming an area that will be called on more and more – up until last year, we had only dealt with small fires and floods (some not so small) and not on a regular basis. I believe it is time for a comprehensive review on how it is structured and how the competing priorities will be managed – not just ignored until it happens again”.*

- Member, DCJ

Overall, the Black Summer bushfire season resulted in significant demands being placed on OEM staff. As well as leading to a range of WHS issues (stress, burnout, conflict, exposure to dangerous situations, etc.) it also led to a significant expansion of the organisation, structural changes and physical changes (with teams being moved to different buildings). Whilst mostly understandable, these changes have been very disruptive to regular OEM staff and have caused role confusion and disengagement with the organisation. This has exacerbated stress, conflict and burnout.

The Association recommends that the NSW Government reviews the existing support services that are in place for OEM staff, including for mental health and WHS to ensure that staff are properly supported to deal with existing issues of stress, conflict and burnout.

OEM also plays the important coordinating role of arranging the secondment of staff from other areas of the NSW public service to ensure the effective operation of emergency evacuation centres. During the Black Summer bushfires, the key people that were seconded to centres were predominately from the Family and Communities part of the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ), including from Community Services and Housing.

## Disaster Welfare (Family and Community Services and Housing)

*“At the height of the evacuation [name of evacuation centre omitted] had almost 2500 people needing our help. We also had over 400 animals including horses, goats, sheep, cats, dogs, chickens, birds, a ferret and others including orphaned baby wombats”.*

- Member, DCJ

*“There were so many other situations I never thought I would deal with...We had many problems with thefts and people taking advantage of the situation, locals that were safe in their homes coming in and stealing boxes of goods then walking around the oval trying to sell them to evacuees. We had a man moved on by Police and we were told he was well known to them regarding offenses against children, the Centre was full of children. We had domestic incidents and dog fights and arguments between service providers over who was in charge of what, all of which people looked to us to deal with”.*

- Member, DCJ

The work performed by the seconded staff at bushfire evacuation centres is referred to as ‘Disaster Welfare’, with the leadership role at each evacuation centre being the ‘Welfac’. Many of our members served in Welfac or Deputy Welfac roles during the Black Summer response. These workers are drawn from areas such as Child Protection and Housing on a largely volunteer basis.

Just like our members on the fire front have told us, our members on the frontline of these emergency evacuation centres during the Black Summer bushfires have advised us they were thrown into situations for which they were untrained and under-prepared.

*“I could go on all day about how badly managed before, during and after the bushfires were. No planning, no training, no understanding and apparently no care”.*

- Member, DCJ

*“There was absolutely no leadership from DCJ. As an agency providing face to face response at evacuation centres there was callous disregard for the staff, the amount of hours worked, the broad variety of issues that presented at evacuation centres, and the absolute lack of provisions/supplies to the evacuation centres. Only for the skill and commitment to community by the (largely caseworker) staff at evacuation centres, did a bigger disaster not befall us. Leaders were not seen or heard, requests for assistance were usually ignored, and we have not been paid in accordance with our Award”.*

- Member, DCJ

*“I feel that the management of [name of evacuation centre omitted] left much to be desired and had potential to impact on both staff safety and the service delivered to evacuees in the area”.*

- Member, DCJ

*“It was a challenging time trying to balance the core business functions of the Community Service Centre and also the Evac Centres and staff were often stretched thin and left exhausted in the process”.*

- Member, DCJ

Teams were formed where the majority of team members had no training in disaster welfare or trauma-informed practice. Staff were forced to work long shifts without proper shift breaks, funds were not flowing to the centres, communication was chaotic, with Disaster Welfare staff often receiving conflicting messages from external management, all the while dealing with large numbers of evacuees who were experiencing varying levels of trauma and distress.

Due to poor planning and stretched resources, staffing was insufficiently managed:

*“On the “peak days” Friday and Saturday (3/01 - 04/01/2020) staff needed to be on board mostly all day until late evenings of those days, we were making these decisions against the roster because that was where the need was. I was being given my roster via a text message at 3am in the morning after I had just worked long hours waking to find I should've started work at 7am”.*

- Member, DCJ

The following lists some of the many duties and functions carried out by Disaster Welfare workers during their experiences over the fire season:

- Undertaking work with community whilst their own home and family were at the fire front;
- Having to constantly liaise with the RFS to see if the evacuation centre was safe and needed to be evacuated;
- Having to deal with a number of medical emergencies;
- Establishing a workforce of state government, local government, RFS, SES, NGO, Defence and evacuee volunteers to staff an evacuation centre 24 hours a day;
- Establishing an evacuation centre that in the case of several of the south coast centres went from a few people to nearly 5000 people within 24 hours;
- Establishing adequate sewerage and porta-loos to prevent diarrhoea and vomiting that had developed from failing toilets;
- Organising enough supplies of food for people;
- Having to negotiate between the Salvation Army and the defence force over space in the kitchen to cook food for the public and defence personnel;
- Organising with DPIE officials and local government to assist residents with their livestock and establishing cattle yards in showgrounds and football fields;
- Trying to find emergency housing for people when their home had burnt down;
- Working 24 hour shifts because the relief that was coming from Sydney could not travel safely through fires;
- Having to liaise with police and get evacuees removed after they become violent or when theft occurs;
- Having to work in environments where there was no air conditioning and the temperature was into the high 40s inside and outside;
- Working in acrid thick smoke causing significant respiratory irritation; and,
- Dealing with traumatised people who have been isolated from their family or have lost everything they owned including heirlooms and memories of passed loved ones.

An important issue raised with the Association was the fact that DCJ did not have proper planning processes in place to ensure that seconded staff were backfilled in their substantive roles. Community Services and Housing staff perform critical roles in assisting some of the most vulnerable people in our society. By failing to backfill these substantive positions, these workers were affectively being forced to assist one group of vulnerable people while abandoning another.

*“My biggest challenge was that my business as usual child protection (CP) caseload was not re-allocated and the cases that I had were left with no-one to manage them meaning*

*that families were not supported and essentially - children were placed at risk. I did try to attend to emails and phone calls in relation to my CP matters as best I could however the workload between working 12 to 20 hour shifts doing Disaster Welfare work and also trying to manage a caseload was enormous. When I came back to my normal CP role – it was a case of play catch-up and try to re-contact with the families that had been left behind in the crisis...”*

- Member, DCJ

Not only did a lack of backfilling these substantive positions potentially endanger these worker's regular clients, it also meant that these staff returned to their regular roles with an enormous, backlog of work, and the Association understands that managers in some cases were not understanding and accommodating, and placed further pressure on these staff to get the work done.

Many of the evacuation centres struggled to receive much-needed funds in a timely manner, which caused significant stress to both the centre staff and the evacuees. The poor management of funds is an example of DCJ's failure to meet the needs of the crisis.

*“I started work at the showground and no one knew about access to money, vouchers and were not calling accommodation for elderly evacuees or those that were vulnerable or disabled, whilst this was limited in the area given the huge numbers, those that needed it most were still not being offered it - placing 90yr old people on the hard wooden floors was not acceptable. I had an elderly man that sat in his wheel chair and urinated into a bottle in front of people because with 2,500 ppl there was nowhere for him to go and no disabled toilets at the evacuation centre - how humiliating for this man. Local resources, agencies, government (health) and NGO's were refusing to take him and so he sat in his chair for over 9hrs whilst I and the centre manager argued with services for support and care for him which we got just short of midnight”.*

- Member, DCJ

In addition to funds for the evacuation centres, many members have reported issues with receiving their entitlements for working during the crisis, including payments of allowances and overtime. Staff have experienced significant delays in receiving the funds, and many members have felt unsupported, often having to independently seek out and chase up the funds they were rightly entitled to and have faced interrogation and scrutiny over their claims.

*“The backlog of pay was no doubt huge, however the expectation on how forms were completed and approved was so inconsistent it become frustrating to complete the work and I at one point considered not applying for overtime pay”.*

- Member, DCJ

Another issue raised with the Association by our members was that of local DCJ staff working during a crisis that was directly impacting their lives and livelihoods. Many staff were working while their own homes were under threat, or they had family members on the fire front. Working whilst experiencing personal anxieties and trauma can be difficult for staff themselves and was also unhelpful for their colleagues and the evacuees who themselves needed support. DCJ must conduct proper planning in Disaster Welfare to ensure there is enough staff to deploy to affected areas in order not to require local staff to work if they themselves are affected by the crisis.

*“No one has said thanks for working 24 hours straight, for helping incontinent people try to get to the toilet, for managing the potential for theft when people brought all of their prized possessions to a centre, for negotiating with family members of elderly people (who had been dumped at centres) to come back and collect them, or for driving around with people and their animals in our own cars. We copped abuse from police and traffic managers, and then we had lovely hugs from people who we had sat with for 12 hours*

*whilst their house was in danger. All of this whilst defending our own homes. We didn't have the opportunity of escaping somewhere safe because we had been asked to be on standby, only to find we are not being paid for this".*

- Member, DCJ

Stories of other Disaster Welfare workers also demonstrate extreme bravery, kindness and stoicism, and despite a number still not having been paid properly at the time of this submission, most were honoured and proud of their contribution to help so many people when they needed it. One such story of the kindness of our members is featured in the box below.

#### **Story from the evacuation centre frontline**

*"Ray had been out for 15 days fighting the fires with the RFS and while he saved homes his home burned to the ground, he lost everything and as I filled in his registration and asked about family he told me his little girls and wife were safe but he couldn't get to them due to road closures. He went silent and began to sob and as I sat and held his hand. The enormity of what I was doing after several days finally sank in. I held it together while I spent time with Ray, he refused accommodation and said he would sleep in his car outside he just wanted to be near people. Ray had nothing but the clothing on his back, yet he was telling me there were people worse off than him. I heard this repeatedly from people over the coming days. Ray returned composed again a short time later and asked to use my phone, his wouldn't work. He then hugged me and thanked me for everything we were all doing for his community. This was one of hundreds of hugs I would give over the coming days. While talking to Ray, I discovered he was out of petrol and had lost his wallet. There were no emergency cash provisions and everything in Bega was closed. I lied to Ray a short time later when I gave him the \$100 from my wallet, I told him that someone had heard his story and asked me to pass it on to him. I didn't want Ray to feel he owed anyone anything so I told him I couldn't remember who gave it to me. This allowed Ray to get to his wife and children the following day when the road opened."*

The Association recommends that the DCJ put the following measures in place in order to ensure that the department is better prepared for future bush fire and other emergency seasons:

- That DCJ review its Disaster Welfare management plan, ensuring that the plan includes proper fund management and comprehensive staffing scenarios, (considering more deployments and not expecting local staff to work while they themselves are suffering);
- That DCJ then ensure that all staff are properly trained for this plan, including a higher level of training for those running the centres;
- That DCJ properly backfills those staff who are seconded to work in Disaster Welfare; and,
- That DCJ ensures that all seconded staff are properly supported upon their return to work, including being provided welfare checks and having their deployment entitlements (including any allowances and overtime) being paid quickly and correctly.

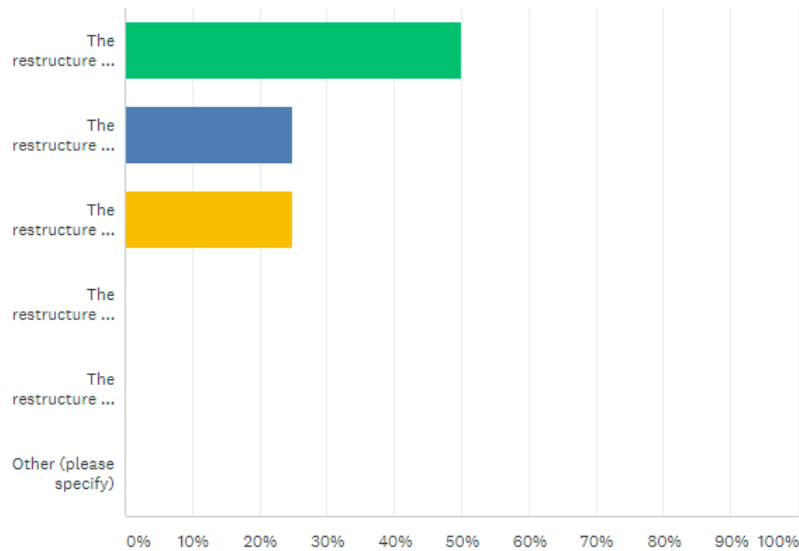
### **NSW State Emergency Service**

In 2017- 2018 SES underwent an organisational transformation which reduced the structure from 17 Regions to 5 Zones. This also resulted in a loss of a field allowance which attracted a 15% loading for a number of staff across the regions. The restructure was disruptive and the way it was implemented severely affected morale. Staff report that the way the restructure was undertaken was undermining for staff and they felt there was no genuine consultation and SES imposed a model that was really about saving money and reducing resources. Further, everyone who managed the transformation left shortly after and the processes put in place were not more effective or efficient. Some employees had to take lower graded positions, and there were some redundancies as a result, although management had stated originally that there would be no redundancies. As can be seen from

the below graph, 75 per cent of members surveyed thought that the restructure had a negative impact on the organisation’s ability to respond to the Black Summer bushfire season.

To what extent do you think the above restructure impacted the ability of the NSW SES to respond to this bushfire season?

4 responses

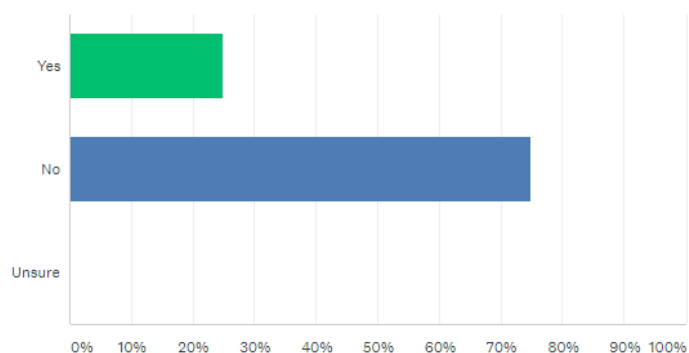


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
▼ The restructure had a very negative impact	50.00%
▼ The restructure had somewhat of a negative impact	25.00%
▼ The restructure had no impact	25.00%
▼ The restructure had somewhat of a positive impact	0.00%
▼ The restructure had a very positive impact	0.00%
▼ Other (please specify)	Responses 0.00%

Public Service Association (2020) Membership Survey – State Emergency Service

In your opinion, does NSW SES currently have the necessary level of resources to protect and assist in moving forward into future events of this and lesser magnitudes and to continue to provide the necessary support to the Community of NSW?

Answered: 4 Skipped: 0



Public Service Association (2020) Membership Survey – State Emergency Service

In 2019 SES underwent a further restructure in one directorate and as a result some positions were deleted and there were a small number of further redundancies.

The SES's core business relates to responding to natural disasters including floods, storms and tsunamis as well as supporting other agencies such as Fire & Rescue and NSW Police. In a bushfire emergency the SES assist with road and land rescues, land clearing such as getting rid of burnt trees and finding missing people. They also organise catering to assist the other agencies. As can be seen in the above graph, 75 per cent of SES survey respondents believe that the SES does not have the necessary level of resources to respond to future catastrophic national disaster events, including bushfires.

## Corrective Services NSW

During the Black Summer bushfire season, Corrective Services NSW (CSNSW) officered dealt with a number of complex and potentially dangerous situations, with many of the regional gaols directly in the line of fire. In the midst of the crisis our members were required to evacuate the Glen Innes, Oberon and Mannus Correctional Centres, all of which they achieved without incident or mishap. A number of our members were also required to work under appalling circumstances both at Lithgow and South Coast Correctional Centres when wildfire extended to the perimeters of these facilities.

In the lead up to the weekend of 4 January 2020, members at the South Coast correctional Centre and Batemans Bay Court Escort and Security Unit were required to work in dangerous and stressful circumstances when a wildfire spread from Nowra to the Victorian border in a matter of hours. Officers deployed at these facilities had to perform their normal duties whilst being concerned for the welfare of their loved ones, family and their broader community. Many were unable to contact their own families while they were working, some of whom were already in evacuation centres, or defending their family homes.

The Association has also learned of members who provided critical relief to a number of areas on the South Coast. Prison officers Graham and Liz Reid organised boats and donations of supplies for people cut off by fire within their community whilst their own home was under threat. They ferried supplies to people on boats as fire had cut off access. These officers were recognised with a PSA POVBA delegate achievement award. The South Coast Correctional Centre prepared for the Currowan super fire as it head north straight for the Correctional Centre with over one thousand inmates inside. They worked with retained fire-fighter staff to ensure the integrity and safety of the centre and contingency plans if the gaol caught on fire. Their efforts were successful and they did not end up requiring the difficult evacuation of these mostly maximum security inmates.

The Association wrote to the Minister for Counter Terrorism and Corrections, Anthony Roberts, requesting that a NSW medal be struck to recognise the exemplary services that members of the NSW Public Service provided during the Black Summer bushfire season (**ATTACHMENT K**).

## Public Sector Fire-Fighters

A number of Association members and Association staff who work outside of the firefighting agencies contributed many hours to fighting these fires as volunteers and as retained fire-fighters. Many reported that they were in brigades where a large percentage of volunteers were state and local government workers, much more than the population average. The over representation of public servants within the volunteer ranks, may be due to conditions of employment of public servants allowing for special leave for volunteer firefighting work.

*"I have public sector members in my brigades but the majority of members would be in private enterprise or self-employed. The public sector award conditions whereby members are paid special leave to attend and are permitted to attend Rural Fire Service operations enables greater participation from these members than their share of the labour force. To put it into context, if you are a casual worker or run your own business, or run a farm, you*

*are simply not going to get the time back or any money and are more likely going to have to back it up again after your firefighting shift with a shift to bring some money in. I take my hat off to these volunteer members. When you have fires that lasted as long as the ones this summer, you need to have a reliable mechanism to get your volunteer fire-fighting labour force that does not cause the conflict between personal financial and work needs and your volunteer needs. The public sector and very few private sector enterprise agreements have these arrangements”.*

- Greg Corrigan, volunteer Rural Fire Service Group Captain & industrial officer (industrial relations)

This creates a long term problem for the current structure of firefighting into future years as we must rely heavily upon one sector that comprises only 10% of the labour force to undertake a greater share of the hazard reduction, and fire-fighting response.

These members were tested this fire season as a number were required to be deployed for weeks, whilst their core work continued, including in environments of yearly 3% budget and staff cuts being implemented through restructures whilst fires were blazing.

Whilst we have a model of volunteer firefighters significantly coming from the public sector, we must recognise that their contributions to the community are above and beyond their day jobs, and that we will be unable to fight similar fires in the future if there is not an available workforce to supply these volunteers.

## **Recommendations – TOR 8**

It is the overall recommendation of the Association and our members that:

The NSW Government increase the number of paid firefighters and fire management staff across all NSW fire combat agencies, including the NSW Rural Fire Service, the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service and Forestry Corporation of NSW in order to ensure that the State of NSW is best able to fight and prepare for future fire seasons.

In relation to TOR 8 of this inquiry, the Association further recommends that:

25. The NSW Police Force adequately funds and rosters in advance for increased staffing levels during forecast major weather events and possible emergency situations at VKG.
26. The Department of Communities and Justice:
  - a) review its Disaster Welfare management plan, ensuring that the plan includes proper fund management and comprehensive staffing scenarios, (considering more deployments and not expecting local staff to work while they themselves are suffering);
  - b) ensure that all staff are properly trained for this plan, including a higher level of training for those running the centres;
  - c) properly backfills those staff who are seconded to work in Disaster Welfare; and,
  - d) ensures that all seconded staff are properly supported upon their return to work, including being provided welfare checks and having their deployment entitlements (including any allowances and overtime) being paid quickly and correctly.
27. A NSW medal be struck to recognise the exemplary services that members of the NSW Public Service provided during the Black Summer bushfire season, particularly to recognise the efforts of workers who do not work in areas where it is the tradition to recognise efforts of bravery in an emergency area.
28. The NSW Government reviews ongoing budget cuts that ensure the pool of available firefighting volunteers does not reduce.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

### Commonwealth Coordination

#### Response to

#### **Term of Reference 9: Coordination and collaboration by the NSW Government with the Australian Government, other state and territory governments and local governments.**

The catastrophic fires that stretched across state borders all down the southeast of Australia in 2019-20 and the warnings that there will be more to come in future years are a clear indication that bushfire prevention, management and emergency response need to be a *national* priority. State governments and their agencies should no longer be expected to carry the full strategic and financial burden for fire preparedness.<sup>85</sup>

Emergency management is a state/territory responsibility across Australia and it is the position of the Association that this should continue to be the case. Historically, if and when the Commonwealth has intervened or assisted a state or territory in a natural disaster, it has been during the recovery or evacuation phase. This is largely the role the Commonwealth played in the 2019-20 Black Summer bushfire season, with reactionary measures introduced as the crisis unfolded including compensation payments to RFS firefighters, deploying parts of the Australian Defence Force to assist with recovery, including naval ships and army reservists,<sup>86</sup> and establishing a National Bushfire Recovery Agency.<sup>87</sup>

The expanse and severity of the Black Summer bushfires raised serious questions about whether the Commonwealth needs to play a greater role in the preparedness side of bushfire seasons, the Commonwealth must begin to play a strategic and financial role in every step of the way from preparedness all the way through to recovery and resilience.

Whilst maintaining the responsibilities of the states for the management of natural disasters, the Association suggests that there is a national coordination and oversight role for the Commonwealth analogous to the broad responsibility of the Commonwealth in relation to public health to ensure national standards as well as providing additional funding to the state and territory agencies through COAG

#### **National Aerial Firefighting Centre**

The National Aerial Firefighting Centre (NAFC) was formed by the Australian states and territories in July 2003 to provide a cooperative national arrangement for combating bushfires. It achieves this by facilitating the coordination and procurement of a fleet of highly specialised firefighting aircraft that are readily available for use by state and territory emergency service and land management agencies across Australia.

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<sup>85</sup> Keenan, R. (2020), 'There's only one way to make bushfires less powerful: take out the stuff that burns', *The Conversation*, 6 January, <https://theconversation.com/theres-only-one-way-to-make-bushfires-less-powerful-take-out-the-stuff-that-burns-129323>

<sup>86</sup> Convery, S. (2020). 'Morrison's government on the bushfires: from attacking climate 'lunatics' to calling in the troops', 4 January, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/jan/04/morrison-s-government-on-the-bushfires-from-attacking-climate-lunatics-to-calling-in-the-troops>

<sup>87</sup> The Prime Minister of Australia (2020). 'National Bushfire Recovery Agency', media release, 6 January, <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/national-bushfire-recovery-agency>

There are current inadequacies with NAFC, including the size and variety of aircraft within the fleet. These issues are directly tied to funding and the buck passing that takes place between the Commonwealth and state governments.

The NAFC is jointly funded by the Australian, state and territory governments, with the Commonwealth providing \$14.8 million annually.<sup>88</sup>

In 2016 a proposal was put to COAG requesting the Commonwealth to acquire a fleet of fixed wing large air tankers (LAT). This was ultimately rejected as bush firefighting was deemed a matter for the states.<sup>89</sup> The current joint funding for NAFC remains inadequate to purchase these LAT aircraft. Reliance on a fleet of contracted LAT aircraft is not a viable option, as Australia and other foreign countries look to expect longer and more expanded fire seasons in future, the availability of contracted or loaned aircraft cannot be guaranteed.

Members of the Association have made calls for a national fleet:

*“Most [aircraft] need to be upgraded to meet current standards. A central pool (possibly national) would be helpful”.*

- Member, RFS

*“More of all as a shared national resource [aircraft]”.*

- Member, RFS

The severity of the Black Summer bushfires highlighted the need for all state and territory governments to significantly increase their spending on bushfire preparedness, resilience and recovery. It is the position of the Association that, given this need as well as the fact that the Black Summer bushfires spread far and wide across borders, that the Commonwealth should assume a larger, if not primary role, in funding the NAFC.

### **Central Coordination Authority: Submission to the Royal Commission**

In our submission to the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements, the Association made the recommendation that a central coordination authority should be established by the Commonwealth Government to provide an overarching base of financial and strategic support to each Australian state and territory and a set of national standards for all firefighting agencies.

It is our recommendation that this central coordination authority should set national standards for bushfire preparedness, including the number of paid firefighters in each state and territory (determined per hectare of at risk bushland), the equipment used by each state and territory, including vehicles, aircraft and communications systems, training in both firefighting and fire management, and safety standards.

Furthermore, we recommended that the Commonwealth develop key performance indicators for inclusion in the Productivity Commission’s Annual Report on Government Services, including the number of bushfire firefighters per state and territory, hazard reduction performance, equipment numbers (that meet the national standards set by the central coordination authority), the amount of training conducted each year (that meets the national standards set by the central coordination authority), as well as recovery indicators.

In addition to this, the Association suggested that the Commonwealth provide a significant increase in federal funding to the states and territories in the areas of hazard reduction, research and to the NAFC.

The Association refers the Inquiry to our submission to the Royal Commission for the comprehensive set of recommendations.

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<sup>88</sup> Australian Senate Report, Australian Government to Report from Inquiry Responses to, and lessons learnt from, the January and February 2016 bushfires in remote Tasmanian wilderness, 8 December 2016,

[https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/Senate/Environment\\_and\\_Communications/TasmanianBushfires45/Government\\_Response](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Environment_and_Communications/TasmanianBushfires45/Government_Response)

<sup>89</sup> Sydney Morning Herald, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/government-rejected-major-air-tanker-expansion-20200103-p53onl.html>

# CHAPTER NINE

## Safety of First Responders

### Response to Term of Reference 10: Safety of first responders.

Thirty-three lives were tragically lost as a direct result of the Black Summer bushfires. In NSW, these included three RFS volunteers and three aviation contractors from the US. These people paid the ultimate sacrifice for the communities of NSW and the Association requests that their circumstances surrounding their deaths, particularly the three aviation contractors, be properly examined.

The following chapter details common responses from members regarding their experiences of their and their colleagues' safety during the Black Summer bushfires. From the incidents described to the Association by our members, it appears that there were a number of concerning incidents involving safety breaches which were played down as near misses that can and must be learned from.

Firefighting is inherently dangerous, however, by learning from past incidents, we can mitigate against its inherent risk. It is particularly important to learn from incidents or safety breaches during the Black Summer season, given the warnings that there will be similar catastrophic fire seasons into the future.

The firefighting environment is changing dramatically. Existing safety systems must be reviewed in order to be adapted to the new catastrophic fire setting, and additional safety systems will need likely to be developed to keep firefighters safe during extended extreme fire-fighting scenarios such as the one we just experienced.

### Safety Incident and Breaches

We asked members *"During the fire season, have you witnessed or been involved in any safety incidents/breaches?"*

To this question respondents answered in the various agencies answered yes as follows:

- 39.2% in Rural Fire Service
- 42.86% in National Parks and Wildlife Service
- 27% in Forestry Corporation of NSW

The following is a selection of direct quotes from our members of the types of incidents and/or breaches they witnessed, were involved in during the Black Summer bushfire season.

A summary of some of the main safety issues faced by frontline workers during the Black Summer bushfire season is set out below. Stories from the fire front as well near misses and incidents are listed, followed by more detailed summaries of safety issues that need immediate attention from the NSW Government including fatigue management, accommodation and amenities, communications, vehicles, aircraft, training, personal protective equipment and clothing and mental health. Further information can be provided, subject to suitable confidentiality arrangements.

## **Fire front operations**

- *“Seen many vehicles in over-run/almost over run situations due to the conditions”* (Member, RFS)
- *“Over runs of fire trucks due to the intensity of the fire and worsening of weather conditions”* (Member, RFS)
- *“Being required to work on a burning cliff below an active landslide and under a hovering water bucket helicopter”* (Member, RFS)
- *“Proximity to catastrophic wildfires (radiant heat, 30+m flame heights, extreme rates of fire spread)”* (Member, NPWS)
- *“Four near misses involving falling trees”* (Member, NPWS)
- *“Near miss vehicle collision”* (Member, NPWS)
- *“Raging fires so intense impossible to respond”* (Member, NPWS)
- *“Witnessed an RFS crew nearly get overrun by fire as they approached a grass fire from the uphill side”* (Member, NPWS)
- *“Dislodged rocks falling from above”* (Member, NPWS)
- *“Crews caught behind fire lines at fire”* (Member, NPWS)
- *“Driving through dangerous trees and unstable walls”* (Member, RFS)
- *“Tree falling on vehicle”* (Member, RFS)
- *“Dozer driver without support vehicle in the front of a fire. Dozer operator nearly lost his life”* (Member, NPWS)
- *“Grader driver and support vehicle trapped behind fire line on a dead-end fire trail - All personnel had to be lifted out by helicopter”* (Member, NPWS)
- *“Dozer rolled”* (Member, NPWS)
- *“Lack of adequate patrolling a major highway- risk of vehicle collisions”* (Member, NPWS)

## **Subject to Abuse and Assault**

- *“Being verbally abused on the phone”* (Member, RFS)
- *“Being assaulted by fatigued staff”* (Member, RFS)
- *“Threat of assault by member of the public towards staff”* (Member, RFS)
- *“Abuse of NPWS staff in uniform at local shops”* (Member, NPWS)
- *“Abuse and threatening language directed to NPWS staff on social media, including the DPIE workplace”* (Member, NPWS)
- *“Abuse by firefighters; Abuse by public”* (Member, NPWS)
- *“I was abused on more occasions than I can count, some because I had NSW Government on my shirt and ‘worked for ScoMo’, another because I didn’t have a mask to give her, others because I couldn’t give them information I didn’t know. People were traumatized and stressed and we often bore the brunt”* (Member, DCJ)

## **Injuries/near misses**

- *“Injuries including slips, trips and falls”* (Member, RFS)
- *“Smoke inhalation”* (Member, RFS)
- *“Severe smoke inhalation resulting in loss of voice”* (Member, RFS)
- *“Fire storm at [withdrawn] resulting in multiple casualties”* (Member, RFS)
- *“Toxic fumes from structure fires”* (Member, RFS)
- *“Firefighter suffered heart attack on fire line and was required to be transported to a road ambulance in a service ute”* (Member, RFS)
- *“I was nearly hit by a falling tree branch”* (Member, NPWS)
- *“Colleague heart attack”* (Member, NPWS)
- *“Many with smoke inhalation”* (Member, NPWS)
- *“Burnt hand”* (Member, NPWS)
- *“Heat exhaustion”* (Member, NPWS)

- “Branch falling on car while getting out” (Member, NPWS)
- “Unusually acrid smoke affecting eyes/breathing” (Member, NPWS)
- “Another firefighter suffered a cardiac arrest when exposed to poor air quality, no defibrillator present” (Member, NPWS)

## Fatigue Management

The Black Summer bushfire season was prolonged and intense, spanning from June 2019 until March 2020. The demands on firefighting staff and volunteers were therefore stretched far beyond a regular fire season. When you consider this against the staffing shortages that this submission has outlined, it is unsurprising that many members informed the Association of issues with fatigue management. Common among survey responses were members telling of firefighting staff and volunteers working long hours without appropriate breaks and without important fatigue factors being considered, included the travel time to and from the fire grounds. This includes staff on the front line not getting recommended sleep [8-9 hours] particularly at base camps and many hours of a 12 hour shift spent driving to and from the fire grounds which could have a significant fatigue impact on anyone operating heavy machinery.

*“Staff being required to work over 12 hours”.*

- Member, RFS

*“Volunteers being allowed to work long shifts every day, often for weeks without a day off”.*

- Member RFS

*“Exceeding of appropriate shift length times and travel to and from fire grounds”.*

- Member, NPWS

*“The RFS fail to address staff and volunteers fatigue management by forcing them to accommodate on base camps in plastic tents with five to nine other occupants”.*

- Member, NPWS

*“Poor fatigue management for both our own staff and volunteers and contractors creating risk”.*

- Member, NPWS

The Association understands that generally paid firefighters with award provisions including mandatory break requirements such as in the *Crown Employees (Officer of Environment and Heritage – National Parks and Wildlife Service) Conditions of Employment Award 2015*, there were fewer negative responses regarding fatigue management. This supports the overall argument of this submission that more paid firefighters are needed to fight future fire seasons. If there is an increase to the number of paid firefighters covered by the appropriate industrial instruments, then there should be less issues with fatigue management.

Fatigue was also a serious issue among the non-fire combat agencies who worked on the response. Members of the Association from DCJ who worked at the emergency evacuation centres informed us that they were regularly required to work long shifts without proper shift breaks, due to understaffing and poor planning.

*“I completed a 16.75hr shift, returned to accommodation to eat and sleep. I was woken some 1.5hrs later and advised that I needed to go back to EC [the evacuation centre] as I was being ‘stood down’ and needed to be at the airport [name omitted] ASAP.... by the time I arrived at [name omitted] Airport I had effectively had less than 6 hours sleep in a*

*period of 48hrs and then had to drive a car from the airport to my home. This is a very real and critical OH&S issue”.*

- Member, DCJ

## Accommodation and Amenities

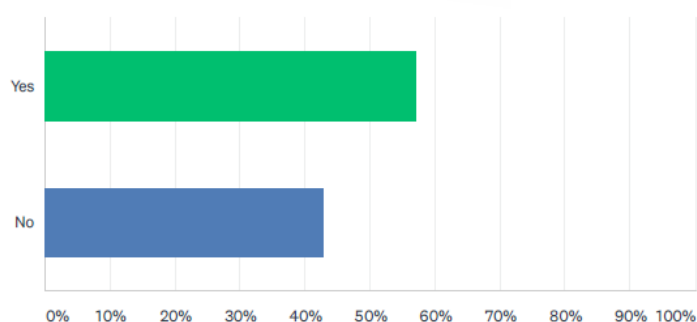
Accommodation provided for work is required under section 19 of the *Work Health and Safety Act 2011* (NSW) to be safe and without risks to health. Accommodation under the public sector awards should be of a three-star rating if available.<sup>90</sup> The Association understands that there were several scenarios where RFS – despite having available accommodation – provided a dormitory marquee accommodation with stretchers, no noise buffering and poor climate control at base camps. There were a number of staff affected by smoke causing coughing, and snoring, further frustrating individuals’ ability to sleep.

*“Base camps were made of plastic, were not to standard, had no effective climate control, were set up on stretchers and in dormitory style with other workers coughing all night due to working in smoke and contributed to inability to sleep, and led to increased fatigue and conflict between workers”.*

- Member, RFS

-

Q10 Did the quality of your accommodation have an impact on your ability to rest and combat fatigue?



CPSU NSW (2020) Membership Survey – Forestry Corporation of NSW

Of our FCNSW members surveyed, 70 per cent of them were deployed to other areas during the Black Sumer fire season. 57 per cent of these deployed members said that the quality of their accommodation impacted their ability to rest and combat fatigue during the fire season.

Our members have informed us that there were a number of occasions where there was no food or water available for fire fighters on the fire line. This logistical issue was improved as the season continued but there does need to be better coordination into the future when there is a prolonged series of fires operating.

*“Crew not having access to food for over 24 hours”.*

- Member, RFS

*“Fire trucks on the foreground without adequate water and fuel”.*

- Member, RFS

<sup>90</sup> *Crown Employees (Public Service Conditions of Employment) Reviewed Award 2009*, cl 26.3

## Communications

The issues of inconsistency and incompatibility across the various communication systems used by fire combat agencies and the consequent safety issues have been addressed in Chapter Three.

Additionally, the Association refers the Inquiry to our submission made to 2018 Bega Valley Fires Independent Review, or 'Keelty Inquiry', where significant communication issues across NSW public agencies were addressed in greater detail (**ATTACHMENT L**).

## Vehicles

Issues with adequate resourcing and consistency of vehicles across agencies has been addressed in Chapter 3. Additionally, there are also significant issues with an inconsistency of safety features within each firefighting vehicle. This means that some vehicles are safer than others. Every firefighter should be equipped with the same level of safe equipment when they are deployed to a fire ground.

Members have informed the Association of a number of safety incidents, including accidents involving vehicles, including:

*"Tree branch fell on Cat 9 unit".*

- Member, NPWS

*"Non-firefighting vehicles being used on active fire grounds".*

- Member, RFS

*"Use of hire cars (unmarked and no radio) on fire grounds".*

- Member, RFS

*"Volunteers being required to drive heavy vehicles home after all night busy shifts for more than an hour".*

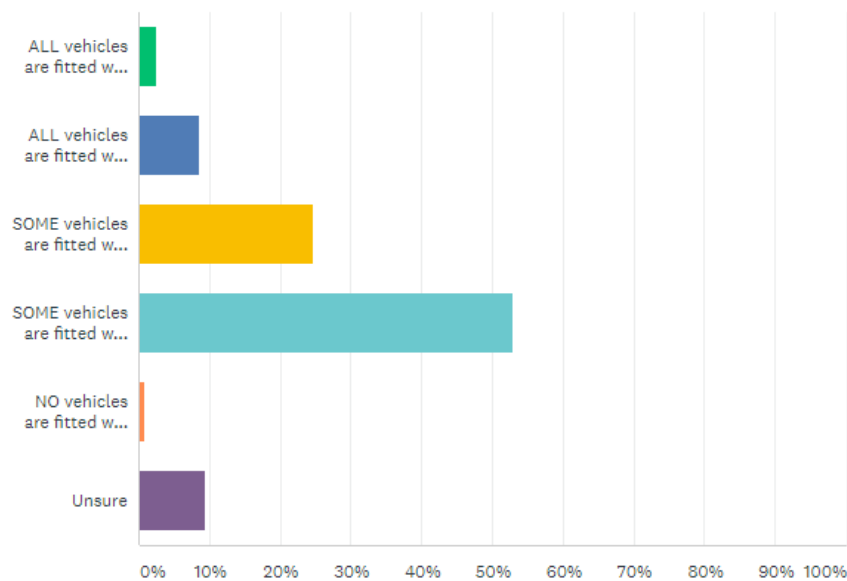
- Member, RFS

*"Failure of handbrake- the vehicle while parked moved and hit tree".*

- Member, RFS

Are RFS NSW vehicles fitted with the appropriate protective systems, including ROPS, FOPS, flashover protection system, drop down thermal curtains? Please select the answer that best describes the entire fleet.

Approved for publication



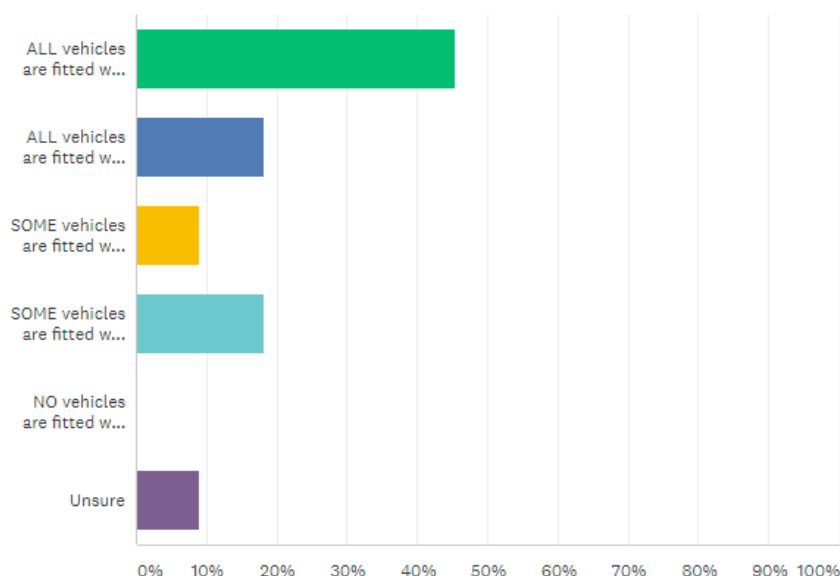
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
▼ ALL vehicles are fitted with ALL appropriate protective systems	2.56%
▼ ALL vehicles are fitted with SOME appropriate protective systems	8.55%
▼ SOME vehicles are fitted with ALL appropriate protective systems	24.79%
▼ SOME vehicles are fitted with SOME appropriate protective systems	52.99%
▼ NO vehicles are fitted with ANY appropriate protective systems	0.85%
▼ Unsure	9.40%

Public Service Association (2020) Membership Survey – Rural Fire Service



Are FCNSW vehicles fitted with the appropriate protective systems, including ROPS, FOPS, flashover protection system, drop down thermal curtains? Please select the answer that best describes the entire fleet.

Figure 11 – Responses



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
▼ ALL vehicles are fitted with ALL appropriate protective systems	45.45%
▼ ALL vehicles are fitted with SOME appropriate protective systems	18.18%
▼ SOME vehicles are fitted with ALL appropriate protective systems	9.09%
▼ SOME vehicles are fitted with SOME appropriate protective systems	18.18%
▼ NO vehicles are fitted with ANY appropriate protective systems	0.00%
▼ Unsure	9.09%

CPSU NSW(2020) Membership Survey – Forestry Corporation of NSW

**Heat (Flashover/Burnover) Protection:** Heat protection technology for what are called burn overs includes heat shields and curtains, and water spraying for the cabin and wheels. This is available on a number of the FRNSW vehicles but is yet to be deployed to a number of regional RFS vehicles or NPWS vehicles.

**Roll Over Protection System (ROPS) & Falling Object Protection System (FOPS):** These can be integrated into the same engineering control. These devices are used overseas in firefighting more prominently than in NSW. They are required in many states to be fitted to all vehicles used in mines where roll overs and falling objects are common. The three volunteer firefighters who were killed in vehicles during the Black Summer bushfires were all killed when their vehicle rolled/flipped over.

Again, inconsistency is prevalent in terms of what protective systems vehicles are equipped with. There is inconsistency across agencies, with FCNSW reporting the most satisfaction with their existing protective systems, and there is also inconsistency across different areas of agencies, such as members in the RFS’s State Mitigation Services reporting that their vehicles were ill-equipped compared to colleagues in other areas.

The Association asked members at RFS and FCNSW whether the vehicles in their agency’s fleets were fitted with the appropriate protective systems. 53 per cent of RFS members said that only *some* vehicles were fitted with *some* of the protective systems, while 45 per cent of FCNSW members said that *all* vehicles were fitted with *all*

systems. The Association did not ask this specific question to NPWS members, however many NPWS members called for ROPS, FOPS and heat protection equipment in the survey's comments section.

*"No standardisation across the state or country. No protection from falling trees. Cat 10 pumpers with no bushfire protection - yet the crews will take them there".*

- Member, RFS

*"There seems to be an increase in the number of vehicles impacted by trees or branches, our fire vehicles should be fitted with FOPS cabin protection and curtains to protect from radiant heat. All fire vehicles and plant should have remote tracking devices fitted and used on the fire ground".*

- Member, NPWS

*"PP System are not uniformed".*

- Member, RFS

*"Lots of older trucks out there with minimal protection systems".*

- Member, RFS

*"Would love to see FOPS and burnover systems including thermal curtains in fire vehicles as well as some good options for respiratory protection".*

- Member, NPWS

*"Some vehicles are fitted with appropriate 'burnover' protection systems. To my knowledge zero support vehicles (often used on fire grounds i.e SMS vehicles, group-officer vehicles etc) have burnover protection. Zero RFS vehicles have FOPS".*

- Member, RFS

*"The rollout of new vehicles is improving the expansion of protection for fire fighters in or via the vehicle protective systems. Note that the majority of vehicles do not have the current issued level of protective systems. Many vehicles are over 15 years in age and have very few of the current protective systems, if any".*

- Member, RFS

*"Whilst my Volunteer brigade had a great standard of the above mentioned I'm very sad to say my work being state mitigation based at [location omitted] have little to no protection on our vehicles".*

- Member, RFS

*"[We] need fire vehicles with ROPs and FOPs not just repainting our 20 year old slip-ons".*

- Member, NPWS

As the Black Summer bushfires demonstrated the increasing severity of bushfires makes the conditions that will be endured by firefighters unpredictable and increasingly dangerous. Numerous incidences of falling trees and rocks and roll overs of heavy vehicles were recorded this bushfire season. The Association's view is that all vehicles in all fire combat agencies should be fitted with the appropriate protective systems including ROPS, FOPS, flashover protection system and drop down thermal curtains as a precautionary measure to ensure that all firefighters are as safe as possible.

#### **First Aid - Defibrillators**

First Aid equipment is standard for most firefighting vehicles and also Remote Area Firefighting Teams. However, due to characteristics of poor air quality, extreme heat, physical exertion and accumulated fatigue, there is an

increased risk of cardiac arrest among firefighters. There were several instances of cardiac arrest among both paid and volunteer firefighters during the Black Summer bushfires. One of volunteers was assisted by a Tasmanian fire team that had a defibrillator. A defibrillator can greatly increase the prospects of survival for people experiencing a cardiac arrest and are now relatively cheap to purchase and should form part of appliance's first aid kit.

## **Aircraft**

It is clear that there are gaps in commander/controller training covering the use of aircraft on the fire ground. This fire season, there was also a lack of communication between the State Operations Centre (SOC) of the RFS based in Sydney when allocating Large Air tankers (LAT) to local Incident Management Teams (IMT).

The SOC of the RFS is responsible for coordinating bush firefighting and related activities across the state for the RFS, including the allocation of LATs. The State Air Desk is located in the RFS Headquarters at Homebush. Its function is to coordinate and allocate aviation resources for firefighting based on requests from Incident Management Teams. The Major Incident Controllers are in Homebush and coordinate with the Incident Controllers in the field. Air Attack Supervisor's (AAS) are on the ground locally operating within local IMTs and tasking aircraft on the fireground based on the needs at any one time. The AAS could be from any of the combat agencies involved in the operation. There is normally a roster of RFS and NPWS AAS. The Air Operation Manger (AOM) runs the local aviation unit and requests aviation resources from the RFS State Air Desk.

The usual sequence of events is that an IMT incident controller (in the field) submits a request for a LAT to SOC and a State Operations Controller usually approves or rejects the allocation of the LAT. Standard Operating Procedure specifies that a lead plane (Bird Dog) flies ahead of the LAT who drops water or suppressant (gel or retardant).

On the day of the Bomber 134 crash on 23 January 2020 as far as the Association understands the established process of tasking aircraft was circumvented. The aircraft that flew that day were tasked by the State Air Desk (4 aircraft were tasked). There was no request for those aircraft from the Aviation Unit within the local IMT. The tasking was not an effective or considered use of these resources and the tasking was in breach of the Standard Operating Procedure. This is an issue that the Association believe warrants further examination.

One critical issues raised by our members is that the RFS State Operations Controllers do not have aviation specific training. Aviation specific training would include training on the capabilities of LAT aircraft and on the effect of weather systems and smoke on LAT aircraft.

In recent years, fire training has been shortened due to budgetary constraints and money saving measures. There are other concerns that should be addressed such as that in the RFS many of the AAS are volunteers which can raise a number of issues.

In NPWS, for example, original Crew Leader training was reduced from two weeks to one week and does not know include the structural firefighting component. NPWS crews did more structural fire work this season than any other. As a result of the reduction of training, there is less opportunity to cover subjects such as effective use of and communication with aircraft.

In NPWS, many of the fire training packages are 20 years old and in desperate need of review and updating. It is 20 years since the tragic Kurin-Gai incident where four NPWS firefighters died. Unfortunately, the changes and improvements in fire training that occurred after this have not been continued. NPWS rely on trainers from the ranks that have increased workloads and supervisors reluctant to release them to conduct training. Many NPWS trainers undertake preparation for training and marking in their own time. This is not a professional approach to fire training.

There is a need for a national training centre, to have minimum standard followed across agencies and for each agency to have dedicated trainers and to break down the "silo" situation that can exist between combat agencies. It is essential that more training priority is placed on communication and cooperation between SOC's and local crews and AAS on the ground.

## Training

As was addressed in Chapter Four and above, NSW fire combat agencies had significant gaps in training for firefighters heading into the Black Summer bushfire season. This gap in training meant that staff and volunteers were being placed in roles and situation for which they were not trained or experienced. This had the potential to endanger both themselves and other firefighters. This is an issue that must be addressed as a matter of some urgency.

*“Insufficiently trained personnel deployed into fire affected areas without adequate support”.*

- Member, RFS

*“Untrained personnel were sent into active fire grounds to undertake assessments of property when it was unsafe to do so”.*

- Member, RFS

*“With regard to fire over runs there were definitely skill gaps in our volunteer leadership at times, placing crew in dangerous situations”.*

- Member, RFS

*“Visitor Experience Branch members being deployed into IMT roles who have no experience or training in this area, whilst others with experience and training not assigned to IMT”.*

- Member, NPWS

*“Non-current/trained staff/people performing fireground/fighting duties”.*

- Member, NPWS

*“Inadequate general safety decisions made by leaders”.*

- Member, NPWS

*“Untrained Staff doing work beyond their capabilities”.*

- Member, NPWS

## Personal Protective Equipment and Personal Protective Clothing

The availability of appropriate PPC and PPE for firefighters was a serious issue during the Black Summer bushfire season. This season highlighted massive discrepancies across agencies and even across different areas of the same agencies.

*“Volunteers not wearing PPC- PPE”.*

- Member, RFS

*“PPC-PPE not available”.*

- Member, RFS

*“Firefighters on the fire-line with little or no PPE”.*

- Member, NPWS

Staff arriving for their shift on the fire ground and not having been provided appropriate or complete PPE/PPC by their area as outlined in the fire management manual”.

- Member, NPWS

“I personally had adequate PPE but other firefighters did not. No one except for 2 people had the new style pants and lightweight jackets”.

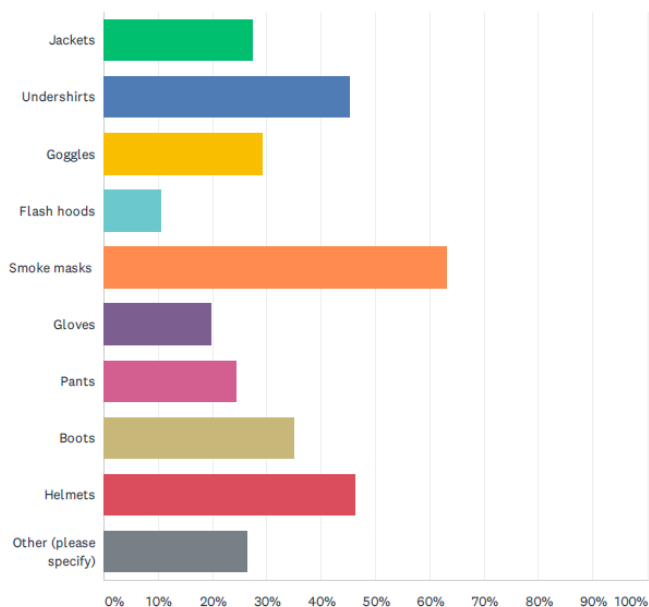
- Member, NPWS

“...need to look at a minimum standard as often it is left up to the Area to source PPE”.

- Member, NPWS

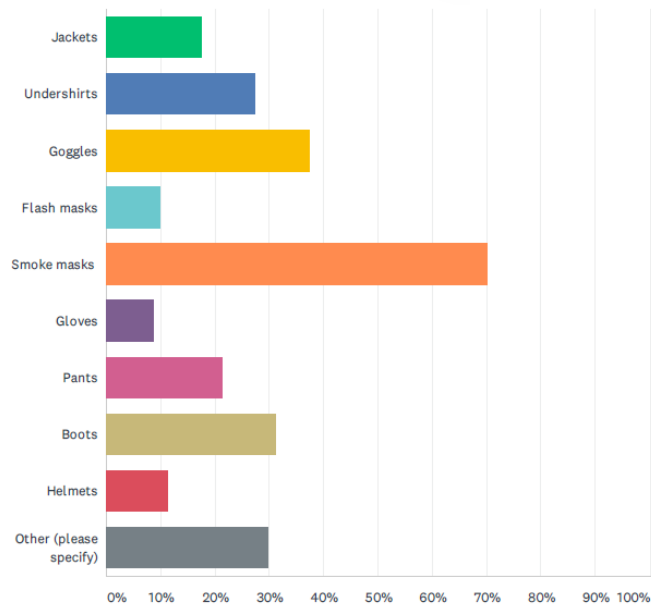
We sought responses from our members to the question, “In your opinion, do you require more of, better standard, and/or updated models of the following Personal Protective Equipment (tick all that apply):” with the following answers:

Q16 In your opinion, do NSW RFS staff and volunteers require more of, better standard, and/or updated models of the following Personal Protective Equipment (tick all that apply):



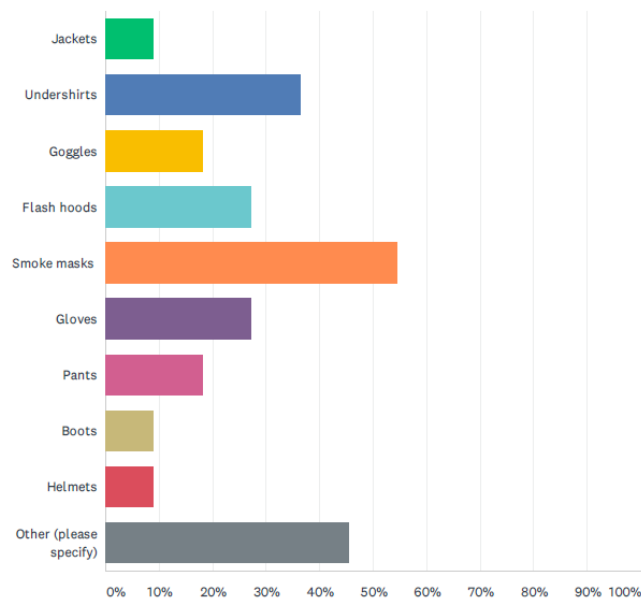
Public Service Association (2020) Membership Survey – Rural Fire Service

Q13 In your opinion, do you require more of, better standard, and/or updated models of the following Personal Protective Equipment (tick all that apply):



Public Service Association (2020) Membership Survey – National Parks and Wildlife Service

Q22 In your opinion, do you require more of, better standard, and/or updated models of the following Personal Protective Equipment (tick all that apply):



CPSU NSW (2020) Membership Survey – Forestry Corporation of NSW

The lengthy duration of the Black Summer bushfire season may at least partly explain why certain areas were not adequately equipped with enough PPC and PPE. Given the predictions that fire seasons will increase in duration, these supply issues need to be urgently rectified – appropriate amounts of adequate PPE and PPC must be stockpiled by every agency.

There is also the issue of inconsistency and incompatibility of equipment across agencies, and the Association has been inundated with members telling us that the degree of protection an individual received was dependent upon which agency they worked or volunteered for. This cannot continue. Every firefighter should be equipped with the same, high standard of personal protective equipment and clothing. The Association therefore recommends that a committee involving employee representatives should be established to determine what PPC and PPE is need for all firefighters across all fire combat agencies and that this committee also works to continuously improve standards of PPC and PPE.

As well as the need for consistency and adequate supplies, members of the Association have also highlighted specific holes currently existing in their PPC and PPE arsenal including:

## **PPC**

*“Head torches & standard issue strobe torches”.*

- Member, NPWS

*“Wet and cold weather gear. New PPE too thin and cold at night in cool climate areas”.*

- Member, RFS

*“Need cold weather gear for winter”.*

- Member, RFS

*“Each person should get minimum 3 jackets, pants and shirts and 2 boots”.*

- Member, NPWS

*“Lightweight fire proof shirts (button up) and T--shirts for working in during mop-up operations”.*

- Member, NPWS

*“Long sleeve shirts worn under bush fire jacket are too hot, short sleeve lighter shirt would be better suited”.*

- Member, RFS

*“Backpacks- with means to carry personal drinking water (should be standard issue camelback style water bladders)”.*

- Member, RFS

*“People who do multi-day deployments should have more sets of PPC”.*

- Member, RFS

*“Duty wear should be available for IMT and day to day duties”.*

- Member, RFS

## **Boots**

*“Wildfire boots instead of structural firefighting boots”.*

- Member, RFS

*“Need boots that are non-structural boots, which are dangerous in a bushland environment and working at any heights”.*

- Member, RFS

*“Boots specifically RAFT should be more task specific”.*

- Member, NPWS

*“Need some decent lightweight boots for RAFT work - there are no real options for bushfire boots - most suppliers now only supply structural firefighting boots which have a heap of features we don’t need for RAFT work but which we have to use as there are no alternatives. It means we spend weeks walking around remote areas in heavy structural firefighting boots that don’t work well for RAFT work”.*

- Member, NPWS

## **Masks**

*“[There is a fixation] on paper masks when a better mask called the fair air mask is available”.*

- Member, RFS

*“Breathing apparatus should be used in a wild fire”.*

- Member, RFS

*“The P2 masks are not effective – you can’t talk through them on a radio/ phone”.*

- Member, NPWS

*“I’m no longer an active fire fighter. One reason for this is concerns about smoke exposure. High quality mask should be available to all staff”.*

- Member, NPWS

There is clear evidence that P2 masks are not satisfactory for dealing with the combination of air particulates produced in bushfires, especially fires as severe and long-lasting as the ones experienced during the Black Summer season. We understand that former RFS Commissioner Fitzsimmons undertook a review to decide whether they issue P3 masks, which have improved filtration. <sup>91</sup>

## **Mental Health**

The Association received a number of inquiries from members seeking assistance for workers’ compensation for stress and trauma related mental health disorders relating to the Black Summer bushfire season.

The longevity, intensity and scope of the fire season saw enormous stresses put on firefighting workers. The fatigue from hours worked, posting away from family and communities, the number of serious critical incidents and ongoing news or experiences of injury and death, had an accumulative effect on firefighting workers and workers supporting first responders.

Over 50% of FCNSW workers who responded stated that that they were deployed for more than 8 weeks over the fire season. When they answered, *“was your family/personal life impacted by your deployment?”* 85% answered yes.

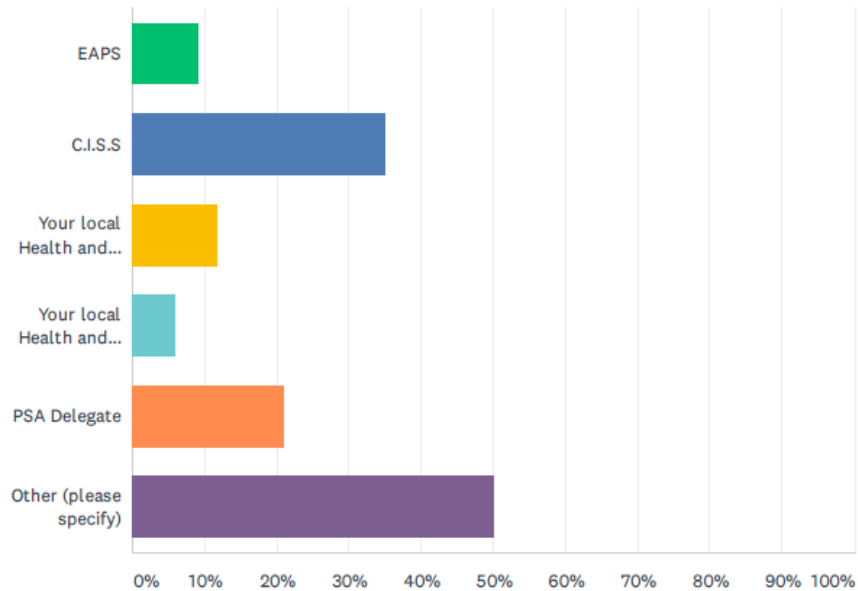
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<sup>91</sup> PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE NO. 5 - LEGAL AFFAIRS, Tuesday 10 March 2020, Examination of proposed expenditure for the portfolio area, POLICE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES, page 70-71



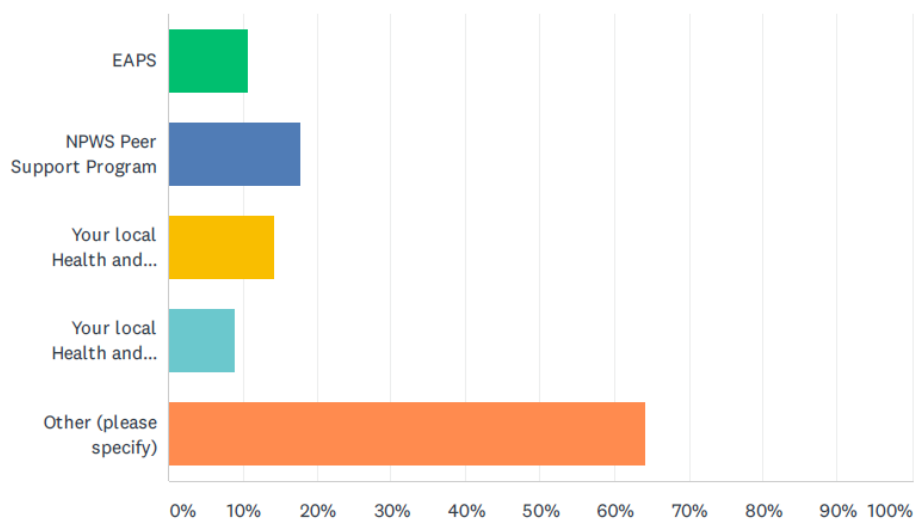
The Association asked members whether they had reached out to support services to help them through the difficult period, and if so, to what services? The Following are the responses from the different agencies:

### Q10 Have you made contact with any of the following services during the current fire season? Tick all that apply.



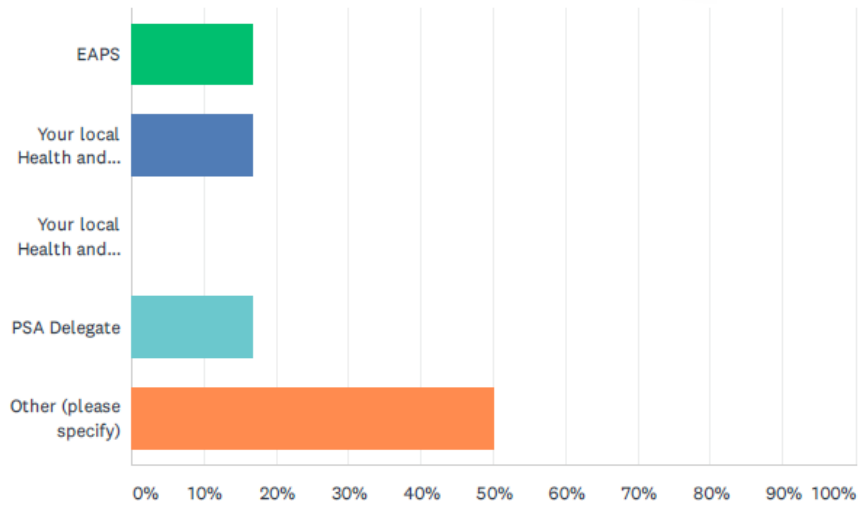
Public Service Association (2020) Membership Survey – Rural Fire Service

### Q8 Have you made contact with any of the following services during the current fire season? Tick all that apply.



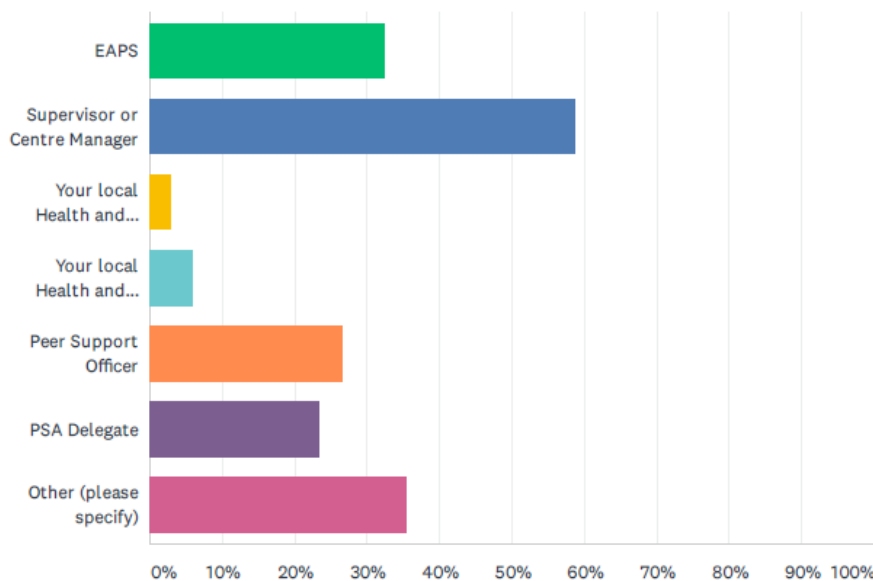
Public Service Association (2020) Membership Survey – National Parks and Wildlife Service

Q17 Have you made contact with any of the following services due to the recent fire season? Tick all that apply.



Public Service Association (2020) Membership Survey – Forestry Corporation of NSW

Q11 Have you made contact with any of the following services due to the recent fire season? Tick all that apply.



Public Service Association (2020) Membership Survey – NSW Police Radio (VKG)

The high frequency of members across all agencies selecting ‘Other (please specify)’ from a list of available workplace support services, indicates that the existing workplace support services are lacking.

A significant number of members have also indicated to the Association that they received no additional support from their workplace during or after the Black Summer fire season. In our surveys, we also asked members, “Do you feel that the existing support services are sufficient to support you and your colleagues through this and future fire seasons?” A majority in each agency said either no, or were unsure.

**RFS**

Yes – 32%

No – 39%

Unsure – 29%

#### **NPWS**

Yes – 33%

No – 23%

Unsure – 44%

#### **FCNSW**

Yes – 27%

No – 9%

Unsure – 64%

#### **VKG**

Yes – 25%

No – 35%

Unsure – 40%

The Association wrote to emergency service agencies during the fire season to ask what services they had available to workers for their mental health (**ATTACHMENTS M – P**).

As demonstrated by the above list of treatments that people received, there are a significant number of people who were affected psychologically by the Black Summer bushfires. This is common amongst first responders. The Black Dog Institute has undertaken research into PTSD and noted a higher incidence of PTSD amongst firefighters in NSW.<sup>92</sup> Amongst the findings, they identified a significant jump immediately after a traumatic incident occurred, and that there was an increase over time that saw increases in PTSD, depression and heavy drinking among firefighters at rates much higher than the population average.<sup>93</sup> This study also indicated that 8% of currently working emergency services workers were suffering from PTSD, and up to 1 in 6 suffer PTSD after retirement. The Black Dog Institute has recommended programs to assist emergency service workers prevent and mitigate the effects of PTSD. The Black Dog Institute also advanced treatment programs to assist workers to recover from PTSD as well as train managers.

As part of a supportive environment, there needs to be measures put in place to actively reduce workplace bullying as identified by the Parliamentary Inquiry into Bullying in the Emergency Services. This Inquiry has had very few of the recommendations implemented.<sup>94</sup> There may be a long way to go for some of the firefighting agencies to adopt these measures due to ongoing workplace bullying not creating a conducive environment to seek help, however, a major event such as the Black Summer bushfires may just be the catalyst to have a shift in attitude to have these organisations look after their staff. The Association recommends that mental health measures that are comprehensive and address primary, secondary and tertiary interventions, are implemented across the first responder agencies as recommended by Black Dog Institute.

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<sup>92</sup> Submission by the Black Dog Institute, Inquiry into the role of Commonwealth, state and territory Governments in addressing the high rates of mental health conditions experienced by first responders, emergency service workers and volunteers, Senate Education and Employment Committee, June 2018

<sup>93</sup> Submission by the Black Dog Institute, p.4

<sup>94</sup> Emergency services agencies / Portfolio Committee No. 4 – Legal Affairs , (Report no. 36 / Portfolio Committee No. 4 – Legal Affairs), “July 2018”, page x

## Recommendations – TOR 10

It is the overall recommendation of the Association and our members that

the NSW Government increase the number of paid firefighters and fire management staff across all NSW fire combat agencies, including the NSW Rural Fire Service, the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service and Forestry Corporation of NSW in order to ensure that the State of NSW is best able to fight and prepare for future fire seasons.

In relation to TOR 10 of this inquiry, the Association further recommends that:

29. In respect of the prolonged bushfire season a review be conducted in consultation with employee representatives into the fatigue management practices of our firefighting agencies and improvements are made to bring all firefighting staff up to the highest standard.
30. Accommodation requirements be reviewed in consultation with the workforce and in line with the industrial instruments to ensure a minimum accommodation standard that enhances workplace safety and reduces fatigue.
31. The bush firefighting training competencies be unified under one competency stream to allow for compatibility of procedures during multi-agency firefighting.
32. Requirements be placed on the agencies to have adequately trained people on board who have the required skills.
33. All vehicles used in fire grounds be fitted with flashover protection as mandatory installation.
34. All new fire vehicles be fitted with mandatory Roll Over Protection System (ROPS), Falling Object Protection System (FOPS), with a target of 3 years to retrofit any existing vehicles.
35. All fire fighters who drive vehicles in fires be required to undertake an off-road driving course for the types of vehicles they are qualified to drive in a fire.
36. A committee involving employee representatives be established to determine what PPC and PPE is need for all firefighters across all fire combat agencies and that this committee also works to continuously improve standards of PPC and PPE.
37. The NSW Government ensures that every fire combat agency is appropriately stockpiled with adequate and necessary PPC and PPE, as per the advice of above committee.
38. Defibrillators be purchased for all fire vehicles.
39. Mental health measures that are comprehensive, become normalised and address primary, secondary and tertiary interventions, are implemented across the first responder agencies as recommended by Black Dog Institute.

## CONCLUSION

This submission has demonstrated that the State of NSW was significantly under-prepared and under-resourced for the Black Summer bushfire season. Much of this under-preparedness and lack of resources was within the control of the NSW Government, which through cuts to staff and critical positions and restructures left its fire combat agencies understaffed, undertrained and lacking in resources and critical experience.

It has also been highlighted in this submission that the changing climate is increasing the size, severity and longevity of fire seasons. There is consensus among experts that Australia will likely see more catastrophic fire seasons like the Black Summer bushfire season of 2019-20, and that they will become more frequent. Long term planning is required. This includes ensuring that there is a sufficient number of climate scientists and experts employed, and that strategic plans are implemented and adequately resourced.

No emergency response is ever perfect: every new crisis will present new challenges and consequently new lessons to be learned. The NSW Government made critical mistakes in its failure to prepare for the 2019-20 Black Summer bushfire season. The government must now turn these acts of negligence into new opportunities.

It is imperative that the NSW Government learn from the mistakes of restructuring, deleting positions, reducing staff, and not providing adequate resources in fire combat agencies and other agencies that provide support during a bush fire crisis. Budgetary concerns should be secondary to ensuring an adequately equipped and well-resourced firefighting and fire management system in NSW.

It is essential that the NSW Government adequately equips its fire combat agencies with enough resources to fight and prepare for future catastrophic fires. Failure to do this will have catastrophic consequences.

The Association urges the NSW Government to implement our recommendation to increase the number of paid firefighters and fire management staff across all NSW fire combat agencies, including the NSW Rural Fire Service, the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service and Forestry Corporation of NSW as well as the other 38 recommendations made in this submission, including that fire combat agencies are exempted from the efficiency dividend and that an agency must take into consideration the impact of any potential restructure on fire management and firefighting staff

Finally, we have used this submission to give the broad overview of our members' experiences during the Black Summer bushfire seasons. If the Inquiry would like to hear more detailed and specific stories of individual members fighting or responding to the fires, more evidence can be provided at a later time.

Once again, the Association thanks the NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry for its work on this issue of great public importance and we look forward to providing any further assistance that may be requested.

## **ATTACHMENTS**

## ATTACHMENT A

<b>From:</b>	Jim Betts	<b>Version:</b>	<b>FINAL</b>
<b>To (BCC):</b>	All staff DPIE	<b>Drafted by:</b>	James Still
<b>Date:</b>	TBC	<b>Reviewed by:</b>	James Abbott
<b>Subject:</b>	Budget savings update	<b>Approved by:</b>	Jim Betts
<b>Mailbox:</b>	Secretary's Mailbox	<b>For distribution on:</b>	20 February 2020



Good morning,

Today, I can share with you how we will meet the budget savings target set by the NSW Treasury for this financial year.

I apologise it has taken some time to reach this point. I also acknowledge that some of you have shared your concerns with me – by email, in person or at the town hall meetings late last year – about the time taken to get us here.

The reason it has taken longer than anticipated to get back to you was due to my commitment to investigate every possible opportunity to avoid a reduction in our staff numbers. We also had to recently adjust our calculations to reflect additional funding the Government is giving us to cope with the drought and bushfires.

#### A recap on our initial budget savings steps

Last November I updated you on some of the initial budget steps we'd taken to meet the \$81.4 million savings target, which included saving:

- \$22 million by cutting back on consultants
- \$10 million by reducing the amount of senior executives
- \$10 million in travel, advertising and legal expenses
- \$3 million by consolidating office space in the Sydney CBD

This message shares how we'll find the remainder of our savings target this financial year, which is approximately \$36.4 million. To put that in context, our Department-wide budget is close to \$6.5 billion.

As I have said before, our guiding principle has been to reduce our non-staff operating costs (including travel, office rent, advertising and the use of consultants) wherever practicable.

### Our final savings plan

Your divisional or group leader will be sending you a message today about the specific savings found within your division, but on a Department-wide level we have found the remaining savings required of us through:

- **Re-evaluation of projects** – we have re-evaluated our current and planned projects and decided to postpone or cancel those which are less strategic or urgent
- **Less backfilling** – when a staff member leaves their position, we will only recruit to replace them when there is a critical need to do so. If a position is not backfilled, you will not be required to take on additional work beyond the scope of your existing duties. Managers have also been advised that team members are not expected to pick up any overflow work. If you have any concerns, please speak to your manager in the first instance to develop a solution. You can also talk to your Director or [People Partner](#).
- **Cutting back further on consultants and contractors** – beyond the cutbacks we've already made on our use of contractors and consultants (by bringing roles in-house and using our existing people wherever possible), many more contractors have recently not had their contracts extended.

In some parts of the Department, we will be making a small amount of highly targeted reductions in staff numbers. These will be based on changes in our strategic needs or due to the deferral or cancellation of a project. Teams that are affected and their union representatives will be consulted, and we will discuss the options available to them.

### Future budget savings

NSW Treasury have also informed us that additional savings will be required of us over the next two financial years, but the scale of these reductions has yet to be finalised.

We have started to take an initial look at how this might impact next year's budget and we will keep you regularly updated as this work progresses.

### Questions

If you have any questions or concerns, you can [drop me a line](#) or chat with your manager, Director or [People Partner](#).

We have also prepared a list of frequently asked questions on the [intranet](#).

Lastly, I would like to thank you for your patience and understanding as we have gone through this process. I know it hasn't been easy. I hope this announcement gives you greater clarity on our overall budget position.

Take care,



## ATTACHMENT B

Public Service Association of New South Wales  
General Secretary: Stewart Little President: Kylie McKelvie  
160 Clarence Street, Sydney  
GPO Box 3365, Sydney NSW 2001

Facsimile: 02 9262 1623  
Internet: [www.psa.asn.au](http://www.psa.asn.au)

ABN: 83 717 214 309

Telephone: 1300 772 679

In reply please quote: SL:MG

ESTABLISHED 1899



7<sup>th</sup> February 2017

The Hon. Gabrielle Upton, MP  
Minister for the Environment, Minister for Local Government and  
Minister for Heritage  
Parliament House  
Macquarie St  
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Dear Minister

Congratulations on your recent appointment as Minister for the Environment, Minister for Local Government and Minister for Heritage.

The PSA is concerned about the privatisation of National Parks and the inadequate park management that results, and the attempt to downgrade and reclassify Rangers in National Parks and devalue the essential services they provide.

We are also very concerned that the Zoo is seeking to construct a five-star resort within the precincts of its Taronga facility, and the negative outcome for wildlife conservation.

We would welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss our concerns at your earliest convenience. Please contact Sandra Lockey of my office on [REDACTED] to arrange a meeting.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Stewart Little', written over a white background.

Stewart Little  
General Secretary

# ATTACHMENT C



PUBLIC SERVICE ASSOCIATION  
OF NEW SOUTH WALES

General Secretary Stewart Little  
President Kylie McKelvie  
ABN 83 717 214 309

In reply please quote: AP:jm

27 September 2017

General Manager  
Clarence Valley Council  
Locked Bag 23  
GRAFTON NSW 2460

By email: [REDACTED]

Dear Sir/Madam

**Re: Impacts of proposed restructure of National Parks and Wildlife Service on the Clarence Valley**

The Public Service Association (PSA) represents workers in the Public Sector across NSW, including those who work in the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS).

NPWS are currently proposing a restructuring of the agency across NSW to amalgamate management areas in the newly formed branches. This will include significant changes to staffing, positions and structures. We write to outline the significant impact that these changes will have on the Clarence Valley community.

NPWS currently maintains an office on level 4 of the Government Office block at 49–51 Victoria St, a depot in South Grafton, another depot in Iluka, and a visitor information centre/ kiosk at Woody Head. The office was formerly the North Coast Regional office, and was the base for all regional specialists and technical staff, and the admin and ranger staff for two areas (Clarence North and Clarence South).

This office was occupied by approximately 29 staff when it was last subject to a refit in late 2011 (due to its relocation from level 3 to level 4).

The current proposal by NPWS includes removing one area manager position, most of the admin positions and almost all the regional and statewide specialists. In part, this is

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because of a decision to amalgamate Clarence North and Clarence South areas, and to base the centre for the new branch's administration in Coffs Harbour rather than Grafton. It should be noted, however, that Grafton is much closer to the geographic centre of the new North Coast Branch, and so would be a more logical location.

These cuts would leave only 17 positions working out of the NPWS office in Grafton. This restructure will have a significant impact on the Clarence Valley region, including a significant loss of firefighting resources (including potentially the loss of 7 experienced crew leaders) and the elimination of all Pest Control Officers from the North Coast, bar one who will be located in Coffs Harbour. Wild Pigs, Dogs and weeds could have a significantly increased impact on farming and tourism in the region.

We ask that, as a significant stakeholder in our National Parks, Clarence Valley Council consider making representations to the Environment Minister, The Honourable Gabrielle Upton, as well as local State Member of Parliament The Hon. Chris Gulapitis MP, registering Council's concern over these proposals and the impact on the Clarence Valley Community.

A PSA representative is available to meet with staff or councillors to discuss the matter and provide more information. Asren Pugh can be contacted by telephone on [REDACTED] or by email [REDACTED]

Thank you for your consideration.

Yours faithfully



Troy Wright  
A/General Secretary

# ATTACHMENT D



PUBLIC SERVICE ASSOCIATION  
OF NEW SOUTH WALES

General Secretary Stewart Little  
President Kyle McKeivie  
ABN 83 717 214 309

In reply please quote: AP:jm

27 September 2017

General Manager  
Kyogle Council  
1 Stratheden Street  
KYOGLE NSW 2474

By email: [REDACTED]

Dear Sir/Madam

**Re: Impacts of proposed restructure of National Parks and Wildlife Service on Kyogle Region**

The Public Service Association (PSA) represents workers in the Public Sector across NSW, including those who work in the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS).

NPWS are currently proposing a restructuring of the Department across NSW to amalgamate management areas in the newly formed branches. This will include significant changes to staffing, positions and structures. We write to outline the significant impact that these changes will have on the Kyogle community.

NPWS currently maintains a shopfront and office at 136 Summerland Way that includes four staff. A single admin support officer, an Area Operations Coordinator who works across the Kyogle and Murwillumbah offices, and two Rangers who use the office as a base but spend a majority of their time in the field. It should also be noted that recent years have seen the number of Rangers cut from four to two, and that previously Kyogle was the base of operations of a standalone management area. A joint management officer to support the implementation of the Gidhabul Indigenous Land Use Agreement has also been lost.

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This office provides a valuable service to the Kyogle community, including a staffed shop front that provides information and support for tourists visiting the World Heritage Gondwana Rainforests in the region. This is particularly important as it is part of Kyogle's 'Gateway to the Rainforest' tourism branding and promotion.

The proposal by NPWS distributed for staff consultation includes removing the current admin support officer with all admin support to be located in a depot based in the industrial estate at Alstonville, which is not a public contact site. It also proposes removing the Area Operations Coordinator position that currently works across Kyogle and Murwillumbah. This would leave only two rangers working out of the NPWS office in the main street of Kyogle and would mean that the office will remain unstaffed and closed to the public for most of the time when the rangers are in the field. The PSA also fears that NPWS may determine that the office is not viable and close it permanently.

There are additional impacts of this restructure on the Kyogle region, including a significant loss of firefighting resources and the elimination of all Pest Control Officers from the North Coast, bar one who will be located in Coffs Harbour. Wild Pigs, Dogs and the significant number of environmental and agricultural weeds could have a significantly increased impact on farming and tourism in the region.

We ask that, as a significant stakeholder in our National Parks, Kyogle Shire Council consider making representations to the Environment Minister, The Honourable Gabrielle Upton, as well as local State Member of Parliament The Hon. Thomas George MP, registering Council's concern over these proposals and the impact on the Kyogle Community.

A PSA representative is available to meet with staff or councillors to discuss the matter and provide more information. Asren Pugh can be contacted by telephone on [REDACTED] or by email [REDACTED]

Thank you for your consideration.

Yours faithfully



Troy Wright  
A/General Secretary

# ATTACHMENT E



PUBLIC SERVICE ASSOCIATION  
OF NEW SOUTH WALES

General Secretary Stewart Little  
President Kyle McKelvie  
ABN 83 717 214 309

*In reply please quote: MS:cr*

Mr Atticus Fleming  
Deputy Secretary  
National Parks and Wildlife Service  
59-81 Goulburn Street  
SYDNEY NSW 2000

By email: [REDACTED]  
cc: [REDACTED]

Dear Mr Fleming,

**Re: Current NPWS vacancies**

During the 2017/2018 "Future Parks" restructure, the PSA was given an undertaking that all roles in the new structure would be fully funded and filled. The official restructure documents provided to the PSA as part of the consultation period highlighted a number of vacant and temporary roles that would be filled and or made ongoing through the restructuring.

Recently, the PSA has been advised that a significant number of these roles remain unfilled (including, but not exclusive to, EBMP and other fire-related roles). By way of example, our members report numerous vacancies in the West Branch, in particular within the Darling and Lower Darling Areas. Similar reports have been made from other NPWS Branch's across the state.

The PSA has major concerns that the high vacancy rate places a higher risk on our members who are working in under resourced areas of NPWS. We also hold concerns that some Areas of NPWS may be implementing an unofficial "staffing freeze" in order to meet DPIE wide budgetary challenges. As such the PSA is seeking details of the number of vacant roles which remain unfilled, including classifications, across NPWS by close of business on Friday 29 November 2019.

Would you please contact Michael Sinclair on [REDACTED] or by email [REDACTED] in order to schedule a mutually convenient time for a meeting.

Yours sincerely,

Michael Sinclair  
for Troy Wright  
A/General Secretary

20 November 2019

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# ATTACHMENT F



PUBLIC SERVICE ASSOCIATION  
OF NEW SOUTH WALES

General Secretary: Stewart Little  
President: Kyle McKelvie  
ABN 63 717 214 309

In reply please quote: BT.mh

11 June 2019

Ms Trina Schmidt  
Executive Director  
Membership and Strategic Services  
RFS Headquarters  
4 Murray Rose Avenue  
SYDNEY OLYMPIC PARK NSW 2127

Email: [REDACTED]

cc: [REDACTED]

Dear Trina,

**Re: Eight-Area Management Model – Request for Meeting**

The lack of detail within the Change Management Plan makes it extremely difficult for the PSA and its members to provide meaningful and useful feedback so we can move forward. (The recent Operations Directorate Change Management Plan for example has significant detail and provides a clear vision moving forward.)

As such, on behalf of our members, we would like to meet with the architects of the restructure to discuss and develop a greater understanding of the vision and details to extend to our membership.

Some key areas we would like to explore during this meeting are:

- Details of what tasks the proposed Area roles will be undertaking to meet functions mentioned and service delivery
- What tasks are proposed to be transferred from districts to Areas
- There is a lack of cascading command within the proposed Area structure similar to both Head Office and Districts
- Criteria for selection of Regional (Area) Office Locations is not defined (e.g. transport hub, access to secondary education and employment opportunities)

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- Current vacancies across to full directorate and organisation that may be available for current employees to consider
- Fire Trail functions from outside funding sources are not mentioned, and the lack of clarity with using the Environment function across multiple streams within the Operations Directorate is unclear and confusing.

The period of time that has been allowed for consultation does not appear to allow for sufficient time for detailed consultation. As such we request that it be extended to allow further details to be sent out and comment provided so the best possible base is created for the organisation moving forward.

We look forward to the opportunity to meet with you to discuss details. I can be contacted via email at [REDACTED]

Yours sincerely,



Ben Trillini  
for STEWART LITTLE  
GENERAL SECRETARY



# ATTACHMENT G



PUBLIC SERVICE ASSOCIATION  
OF NEW SOUTH WALES

General Secretary Stewart Little  
President Kyle McKeivie  
ABN 83 717 214 309

In reply please quote: BT/mc

24 June 2019

Deputy Commissioner Rogers  
RFS Headquarters  
4 Murray Rose Avenue  
SYDNEY OLYMPIC PARK NSW 2127

Email: [REDACTED]  
cc: [REDACTED]

Dear Deputy Commissioner Rogers

**Re: Eight Area Management Restructure**

We write in respect to the above proposed restructure and the stipulated consultation period.

Since the announcement of this restructure, the PSA has sought the comment of members. A common theme among these responses is that of the inherent difficulty to provide feedback on a Change Management Plan that comprises of high-level, strategic proposals and very little low level 'nuts and bolts'.

While the PSA does accept that the process of a restructure creates incredible uncertainty and undue emotional anguish, and in view of the ever-approaching fire season, it is in no bodies' interests for the matter to become protracted. However, the PSA does maintain that an additional brief consultation period following the finalisation of the Change Management Plan, is necessary to allow genuine feedback on a restructure that thus far has been exceedingly difficult for members to comment on.

Further to this, the PSA reminds the Rural Fire Service of its obligations under clause 65 of the *Crown Employees (Public Service Conditions of Employment) Reviewed Award 2009* to engage in on-going, genuine consultation with the PSA.

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### Member Feedback

The responses received by the PSA can be summarised as follows:

- All previous restructures have ensured current officers were not disadvantaged via a reduction in grade or forced relocation. We note that these assurances have been absent in the draft materials provided thus far.
- Due to the lack of *real* information in the draft change management plan, it is disingenuous to request feedback from all staff without the requisite information being provided.
- The Draft Change Management Plan states the reason for the restructure is that districts have been afflicted by workloads, however no empirical data is provided to detail this issue.
- Some tasks (including fire investigations and hazard reductions) are being allocated to volunteers as opposed to paid staff to reduce workload.
- There is a general consensus among members that not all staff will retain their positions, rather they will have to reapply and potentially be relocated or reduced in grade.
- The restructure shows smaller areas with less staff and more responsibility.

The PSA does support the increase of 31 full time positions within the Rural Fire Service, however it is vital to give due consideration to the significant and life changing impacts of relocation. Accordingly, the PSA reminds the Rural Fire Service of his obligations under the *Crown Employees (Transferred Employees Compensation) Award*.

Please find enclosed responses received by the PSA for the consideration of the Rural Fire Service.

Yours sincerely,



Ben Trainor  
for STEWART LITTLE  
GENERAL SECRETARY

# ATTACHMENT H



PUBLIC SERVICE ASSOCIATION  
OF NEW SOUTH WALES

General Secretary Stewart Little  
President Kyle McKelvie  
ABN 83 717 214 309

In reply please quote: BT:mb

22 August 2019

Ms Trina Schmidt  
Executive Director  
Membership and Strategic Services  
Rural Fire Services Headquarters  
4 Murray Rose Avenue  
SYDNEY OLYMPIC PARK NSW 2127

Email: [REDACTED]

Dear Trina,

**Re: Request for Update on Area Model Restructure**

We are seeking an update as to the current status of the direct assignment and capability assessment phase of the restructure.

We understand that affected staff at Grades 6/7, 4/5 and 2/3 were to receive notification of their direct assignment to role based upon their EOI preferences in the week commencing 12 August 2019.

Further, we understand that affected staff at Grades 8/9, 6/7, 4/5 and 2/3 were to receive notification of their capability assessment this week, commencing 19 August 2019.

The PSA is being contacted by members stating that no notification has been received in respect to either direct assignment and capability assessments. We accordingly seek that the RFS provide the PSA with an update as to the current status of this phase of the restructure.

Finally, we request that once the 12/13 and 10/11 positions have been filled, that an agency wide notification be provided by the RFS identifying who has filled these positions. We are of the view that such a notification would assist on resettling the RFS after such a significant restructure by helping to re-establishing the appropriate contacts within the agency.

Yours sincerely,

Ben Trainor  
for STEWART LITTLE  
GENERAL SECRETARY

160 Clarence Street, Sydney NSW 2000 T 1300 772 879 W [www.psa.nsw.au](http://www.psa.nsw.au)  
GPO Box 3366, Sydney NSW 2001 F (02) 9262 1625 E [psa@psa.nsw.au](mailto:psa@psa.nsw.au)

# ATTACHMENT I

Total no. roles req'd	Role	Commencement Date	Shift Times (IE days/nights)	Duration	Agency	Notes
<b>Glen Innes (Northern Tablelands)</b>						
1	Operations Support Officer	ASAP	Night	3	Any Agency	URGENTLY REQUIRED
1	Planning Officer Primary	ASAP	Day	5	Any Agency	URGENTLY REQUIRED
1	Planning Support Officer	ASAP	Day	3	Any Agency	URGENTLY REQUIRED
1	RTC - Yarrowitch	ASAP	Night	5	RFS	URGENTLY REQUIRED
1	RTC - Coordinator (IMT)	ASAP	Day	5	RFS	URGENTLY REQUIRED
1	Logistics - Finance Support	ASAP	Day	5	Any Agency	URGENTLY REQUIRED
1	Finance Officer Primary	ASAP	Day	5	RFS	URGENTLY REQUIRED
1	Communications Operators	ASAP	Night	3	Any Agency	URGENTLY REQUIRED
1	Operations Support Officer	ASAP	Day	5	Any Agency	URGENTLY REQUIRED
2	Air Base Operators	19/11/2019	Day	5	Any Agency	URGENTLY REQUIRED
1	Resource Officer Primary	19/11/2019	Day	5	RFS	URGENTLY REQUIRED
1	FEAN	19/11/2019	Day	5	Any Agency	URGENTLY REQUIRED
1	Aircraft Officer	20/11/2019	Day	5	RFS	URGENTLY REQUIRED
1	Heavy Plant Supervisor	20/11/2019	Day	2	Any Agency	URGENTLY REQUIRED
1	GIS Operator	21/11/2019	Day	5	Any Agency	
1	Operations Support Officer	21/11/2019	Day	5	Any Agency	
1	Rural Liaison Officer	21/11/2019	Day	5	RFS	
2	Communications Operators	22/11/2019	Day	3	Any Agency	
1	Logistics - Accommodation	22/11/2019	Day	5	Any Agency	
2	Community Field Liaison Officers	23/11/2019	Day	5	RFS	
2	Logistics - Finance Support	23/11/2019	Day	5	RFS	
1	RTC - Glen Innes	23/11/2019	Day	5	Any Agency	
1	Heavy Plant Operations Manager	24/11/2019	Day	5	Any Agency	
1	DIC	24/11/2019	Day	5	RFS	
1	Management Support Officer (IMT inbox)	25/11/2019	Day	5	RFS	
1	Primary Planning Officer	24/11/2019	Day	5	Any Agency	
<b>Kempsey (Lower North Coast)</b>						
1	Finance Officer	19/11/2019	Day	5	RFS	
1	Log Support - Ground	19/11/2019	Day	5	RFS	
1	Logistics Support - Ground	19/11/2019	Day	5	RFS	
1	Planning Officer	19/11/2019	Night	3	Any	
1	Logistics Catering	22/11/2019	Day	5	Any	
2	Logistics Support - SAP Ordering	20/11/2019	Day	5	RFS	
1	Logistics - Catering	20/11/2019	Day	5	RFS	
1	Air Operations Manager	21/11/2019	Day	5	Any	
1	Logistics Support	21/11/2019	Day	5	RFS	
1	Air Operations Manager	21/11/2019	Day	5	RFS/NPWS	
1	Heavy Plant Manager	22/11/2019	Day	5	Any	
2	Situations Officer	23/11/2019	Day	5	NPWS	
1	Air Base Manager	24/11/2019	Day	5	Any	
1	GIS Officer	28/11/2019	Day	5	Any	
<b>Mid Coast</b>						
1	Logistics Support		Day	3	Any	
1	Public Liaison Officer		Night	3	Any	
1	Response Team Coordinator		Day	5	Any	



1	Logistics Support (Catering)	18/11/2019	Day	5	Any
2	Management Support	18/11/2019	Day	5	Any
2	Communications Officer	20/11/2019	Day	5	Any
2	Logistics Support Officer	20/11/2019	Day	5	Any
2	Operational Support Officer	20/11/2019	Day	5	Any
1	Public Liaison Officer	20/11/2019	Day	5	Any
1	Community Liaison Officer - Intel	20/11/2019	Day	3	Any
1	Air Attack Supervisor	20/11/2019	Day	3	Any
1	Air Operations Manager	21/11/2019	Day	5	Any
1	Aviation Radio Operator	21/11/2019	Day	5	Any
1	GIS Operator	22/11/2019	Day	5	Any
1	Heavy Plant Supervisor	22/11/2019	Day	5	Any
1	Aircraft Officer	22/11/2019	Day	3	Any
1	Safety Advisor	23/11/2019	Day	5	Any
1	Logistics Support (Catering)	23/11/2019	Day	5	Any
1	Aviation Radio Operator	23/11/2019	Day	5	Any
2	Air Attack Supervisor	23/11/2019	Day	3	Any
1	Media Liaison Officer	24/11/2019	Day	5	Any
1	Management Support	24/11/2019	Day	5	Any
1	Planning Support Officer	25/11/2019	Day	5	Any
2	Operations Support	25/11/2019	Day	5	CFS
2	Planning Officer Support	25/11/2019	Day	5	Any
1	Aircraft Officer	25/11/2019	Day	5	Any
3	Airbase Operator	25/11/2019	Day	5	Any
1	Resource Officer	25/11/2019	Day	5	Any
1	Resource Support Officer	25/11/2019	Day	5	Any
2	Logistics Support Officer	25/11/2019	Day	5	Any
2	Air Attack Supervisor	26/11/2019	Day	3	Any

Requested ILU to source particular personnel (CFS)

1. Andrea Geylenbeek
2. Gallan Hodge

## ATTACHMENT J



nsolidated IMT Req...  
KB

ATT00001.htm  
474 bytes



**From:** State Operations [REDACTED]  
**Date:** 19 November 2019 at 4:48:45 pm AEDT  
**To:** All Staff [REDACTED], MIC North [REDACTED] MIC East  
[REDACTED], MIC South [REDACTED], MIC West  
[REDACTED] Interstate Liaison Unit [REDACTED]  
**Subject:** URGENT .... IMT Resourcing Requirements

Good afternoon

With the ongoing unprecedented level of fire activity across the state, we are seeking the assistance of all staff in fulfilling a number of critical IMT roles.

On behalf of the State Operations Controller and the Manager State Operations, I ask that you review the attached list and advise if you are available (with your Manager's approval) to assist.

- For IMT roles in Clarence Valley; Northern Tablelands; Lower North Coast, or Northern Rivers – please reply via email to [REDACTED]
- For IMT roles in Mid-Coast or Hawkesbury IMTs – please reply via email to [REDACTED]

There are a number of roles which you may be able to fill without IMT training – and I encourage you to seek these out.

Similarly, if you have undertaken IMT training, but are not yet qualified, there are also roles that you can assist with, under a Primary Officer.

This will be an ongoing request, which you will continue to receive.

For note of the MIC desks:

Please note, we need to be advised of any positions that are filled via a State resource, so we are not doubling up with interstate. Vice versa, we will advise you ASAP if an interstate person can assist with positions.

Your assistance at this time is very much appreciated.

Regards

State Resourcing Unit.

# ATTACHMENT K



Public Service Association of NSW

General Secretary: Stewart Little President: Kylie McKelvie

140 Clarence Street, Sydney NSW 2000 GPO Box 3365, Sydney NSW 2001

1300 772 679 (02) 9262 1633 psainfo@psa.asn.au www.psa.asn.au ABN 63 717 214 309

In reply please quote: SL/MG

21 January 2020

Minister Anthony Roberts MA (Comms) MP  
Minister for Counter Terrorism and Corrections  
52 Martin Place  
Sydney NSW 2000

Dear Minister

**Re: Recognition of meritorious conduct during the bushfire crisis**

I write to seek formal recognition for the outstanding performance of our members who work in Corrective Services NSW at all classifications and levels.

During the recent bushfire crisis, we saw Corrective Services NSW officers perform to an extraordinary level and deal with a number of complex and potentially dangerous situations. In the midst of the crisis our members were required to evacuate Glen Innes, Oberon and Mannus Correctional Centres, all of which they achieved without incident or mishap. A number of our members were also required to work under appalling circumstances both at Lithgow and South Coast Correctional Centres when wildfire extended to the perimeters of these facilities.

In the lead up to the weekend of 4 January 2020, members at the South Coast Correctional Centre and Batemans Bay Court Escort and Security Unit were required to work in dangerous and stressful circumstances when a wildfire spread from Nowra to the Victorian border in a matter of hours. Officers deployed at these facilities had to perform their normal duties whilst being concerned for the welfare of their loved ones, family and their broader community.

A number of our members work as Retained Firefighters in Fire and Rescue and Volunteer Firefighters in the Rural Fire Service. During this crisis, they have often worn two hats: fighting fires some days and working as Correctional Officers other days. In both roles they have performed outstandingly.

The Public Service Association have also learned of our members providing critical relief to a number of areas on the South Coast. Acts of generosity and kindness that should be recognised.

We understand that CSNSW is currently reviewing a number of recommendations for individual staff members and units to receive Commissioner's Commendations and Unit Citations respectively. We ask that you consider also rewarding Minister's Commendations and bravery awards to staff who have performed meritoriously during this disaster.

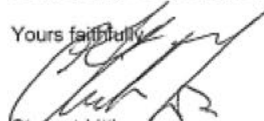
We would ask that enquiries are made in respect to persons who should receive commendations and medals for their meritorious conduct. I think it is fair to say that the entire Department conducted itself in an exceptional way during this terrible crisis.



For staff awarded Commissioner and Ministerial Commendations we ask that any commendations be presented in a similar fashion to the Chief of Defence Force Commendation and the Service Chief Commendations. Where a badge is awarded to the officer in recognition of the commendation and is to be worn on their right breast while in uniform or on the lapel if the recipient is a civilian or in civilian dress.

Finally, we ask that a NSW medal is struck to recognise the exemplary service that members of the NSW Public Service have provided during this crisis.

Yours faithfully,



Stewart Little  
**General Secretary**

# ATTACHMENT L



## SUBMISSION TO THE KEELTY INQUIRY INTO THE BEGA VALLEY FIRE

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04. Introduction

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10. Part Two: Rural Fire Service

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# INTRODUCTION

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A fire like the 18 March Tathra blaze leaves a lasting impact on a town and all who may interact with that community long after the houses are rebuilt. Members of the Public Service Association of NSW (PSA) are an important part of the Tathra community will continue to provide support to the people of the town.

This inquiry provides an opportunity to learn from this incident and try and prevent these types of impacts from occurring again.

The PSA has been a registered trade union since 1899 and has more than 36,000 members. The PSA covers workers across hundreds of occupations in a number of agencies that service the town of Tathra and the surrounding area. Be it the school that was disrupted or the Community Services and State Emergency Services personnel who were utilised after the fire, our members have all worked to reduce the impact on the community. The PSA also covers various civilian roles, such as Police Communications, and those in the relief effort after the fire had passed.

The PSA also covers key personnel in the following fire service agencies that were called upon to manage the fire on 18 March:

- Rural Fire Service: The PSA has exclusive coverage of all staff who work for the RFS
- Fire & Rescue: The PSA covers all non-firefighter staff
- Forestry Corporation: The PSA (through its Federal affiliate, the CPSU NSW) covers staff involved in fire planning, management and firefighting
- Office of Environment and Heritage/National Parks and Wildlife Service: The PSA covers staff involved in fire planning, management and firefighting.

All workers, regardless of who they worked for or what union they were a member of, performed well in trying conditions in the Bega Valley Fire.

The debate in the media following the Tathra Fire comes up time and time again. It is part of a broader issue of turf wars, Treasury Managed Fund funding, forms of work (ongoing, retained, or volunteer), and also union coverage. This issue is not unique to NSW, with similar arguments occurring in other states such as between the UFU-MFB and CFA in Victoria over the past half dozen years. This issue was even raised to national significance in the last federal election by a Prime Minister promising to intervene in the industrial relations between state authorities and their employees. It is also political powder keg, with high numbers of volunteers in marginal regional seats holding significant political influence if they feel they are about to have their fire service reduced or controlled from afar.

In keeping with the scope of the inquiry however, and marginalising the speculation and debate in the media, it should be noted that the inquiry specifically neglects to mention the important role that both Forestry Corporation and NPWS Fire Services and their firefighters have played over decades of preventing fires and also managing fires when they break out on their land under management or neighbouring property. Therefore, a significant part of this submission focuses on these services.

The PSA has focussed primarily in Part 1 on the Term of Reference 1 with regard to the Forestry Corporation and National Parks and Wildlife and in Part 2 on the Rural Fire Service and Term of Reference 2. There will be other parties who may be able to more adequately respond to the detail required for Term of Reference 2.

# PART ONE

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Forestry Corporation and National Parks and  
Wildlife Service



## Term of Reference

### 1. Review and report on the adequacy of the Fire Service's response to the Reedy Swamp fire in Bega that occurred on 18 March 2018 and subsequently impacted upon the township of Tathra.

CPSU NSW members in Forestry Corporation and PSA members in National Parks and Wildlife Services (NPWS) have been applauded for their work managing the fire at Reedy Creek.

This inquiry is potentially a large exercise in hindsight and what-ifs. The fire appeared to commence in private property before entering a Forestry Corporation State Forest under NPWS fire management. Both of these agencies have dramatically reduced their firefighting staff and capacity in the past decade. Despite this reduction in staff the limited remaining staff remaining contributed significantly to the combat and control activities on the 18 of March and the subsequent mop-up.

Fire does not discriminate between the statutory land manager of different forests. There is an MOU or agreement between Forestry Corporation and NPWS to assist each other in managing fires in each jurisdiction and the Forest was managed by NPWS. Despite the competing objects of both agencies, wildfires are not a good outcome for either asset management nor preservation goals of the respective agencies and are jointly combatted.

The firefighters in Forestry Corporation and NPWS are trained and accredited in firefighting and are paid professional fire fighters.

The two agencies, Forestry Corporation (including previous named entities) and NPWS, with Rural Fire Service, have carefully planned hazard management, remote fire management, mitigation, wildfire fire management over a number of decades.

Unfortunately, this Government has significantly neglected its responsibilities to rural property owners (agricultural, commercial and residential), the environmental preservation needs of the environment and park users through a constant campaign of budget cuts and cuts to staff in these two agencies. These cuts limit the capacity for them to mitigate fire risk and fight active fires.

#### Forestry Corporation

Because Forestry Corporation (FC) is a state-owned corporation, it is expected to fund most of its fire management activities out of its own revenue. FC management have cut firefighter numbers and budgets to improve the "bottom line" of the business. However, it does receive a small amount of funding from the state government for Community Service Obligations, which includes fire management in state forest areas which meet certain criteria. FC has had significant cuts to staffing over the past decade, with the last major restructure occurring in 2014. This has seen significant reductions in firefighting personnel including:

- **Statewide** A reduction in total full-time equivalent positions of almost 50 per cent from 1045 in June 2007 to 539 in June 2017.
- **Statewide** In increased proportion of casual and temporary staff, especially in fieldworkers who are at the front line of firefighting operations. These staff are not always available when required and suffer from higher turnover than permanent staff, with the subsequent loss of experience and local knowledge.

For the Tathra fire, officers came from the region and beyond to assist fighting, control and mop up of the fire, including officers from Eden to fire control.

#### Recommendations

The following is a list of possibilities that could be utilised immediately or into the future as recommended by members working for FC.

- Increase the amount of Community Service Obligation funding to include payments for fighting fires off state forest tenure, and for fires which originate on other tenures and spread to state forest. These

types of fires currently consume much of FC's fire management budget, leaving little for important activities such as hazard reduction burning and fire trail maintenance works.

- Change the rules around the state funding of large fires declared under S.44 of the Rural Fires Act, so that FC can claim the wage and salary costs of local staff working on those fires (at present, only overtime costs of local staff may be claimed).
- Increase the number of permanent staff, especially fieldworkers, to decrease the reliance on casual and temporary staff and retain experience and local knowledge within the workforce.

#### **National Parks and Wildlife Service**

In NPWS, the latest round of cuts occurred at the beginning of March this year to cruelly coincide with the end of the fire season. The PSA has warned the Government, including local member Andrew Constance, and Minister Upton that firefighting capacity would be reduced.

The PSA met with Minister Upton in March and December 2017, describing the potential for the restructure to affect firefighting capacity.

There was significant media coverage about these cuts in the local press, with Bega local member and Transport Minister Constance claiming numbers will be increased. However, he neglected to acknowledge the loss of firefighting capability and experience as experienced senior roles are replaced with junior roles with less capability, experience and training.

The basic underlying driver for the cuts has been the Government's efficiency dividend, which requires yearly savings in costs to satisfy Treasury's budget to enable the State to afford items such as stadium rebuilds in Sydney. The efficiency dividend will average two per cent this year but has been applied in a variable manner to different departments so that agencies such as OEH have experienced higher cuts. This has seen NPWS downgrade and consolidate positions to best manage with what it has.

The NPWS ensures its staff are trained in fire management. There are different levels of fire management, depending on the level of training. It was traditionally the role of the Regional and Area Managers to be Incident Controllers.

Amongst the NPWS cuts in March 2018 and in the restructures in previous years have been the following, all affecting fire management:

- **Statewide** 15 highly experienced Area Managers lost in March 2018
- **Statewide** 14 highly experienced Regional Managers in previous restructure
- **Statewide** 100 experienced rangers in recent prior restructures
- **Statewide** 60 dedicated Pest Management Officers and Fire Management Officers were introduced 20 years ago and this number is now down to eight people for 7 million hectares across the state after repeated cuts
- **South Coast** there is one person left who has capability to be the Incident Controller
- **South Coast** Fire management officer 30 years' experience replaced with Fire Planning Officer
- **South Coast** A new Fire Planning Officer has commenced, but has limited crew member hours
- **South Coast** The new Merimbula Area Manager is a crew member only
- **South Coast** A/Team leader Ranger Merimbula: No or limited fire experience and is still to do the crew course
- **South Coast** A/Team leader Ranger Narooma is experienced but has minimal exposure to higher level fire roles
- **South Coast** RAO/logistics Narooma and Merimbula one role gone but remaining has logistics experience.



### **Tathra fire**

On the day, NPWS had present one officer in Bega Fire Control.

One officer was acting as liaison officer with seven strikers to start operations in the park, Mimosa Rocks and Murrah Flora Reserve.

The Area Manager has a large area of coverage and arrived at the fire control at 3.30pm for incident control.

Another officer came on in the evening as planning. He had FIMMS experience, but is now a conservation planning officer with a minimal fire role.

Crew from outside of the area were called in to fill the gaps for control and mop up. We are advised a NPWS crew was involved in saving Tathra's local school.

Despite feeling undermined by the recent restructure and overwhelmed after having the capacity greatly reduced just weeks before, all officers could not find fault in each others' handling of their part of fire operations, despite feeling gutted about Tathra.

This reduction in trained staff makes the response time to combat fires longer. Staff have to traverse longer distances as multiple areas have been merged. There are fewer staff with fire experience covering larger areas. The ongoing ability to undertake hazard reduction over coming years will be greatly reduced.

Future fire seasons look extremely difficult. This fire was over a relatively small area in one location, and controlled with assistance of weather within a short period. In previous seasons there is often a series of fires operating at once in an area often over a number of weeks. The NPWS officers believe they will have significant difficulties with hazard reduction and fire management into future years.

## PART TWO

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Rural Fire Service



The Association sought feedback from the NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) Members

The following is a summary of feedback received from RFS members of the PSA in relation to the terms of references for the Tathra Fire Inquiry.

These PSA members were not directly involved in the fire, as they are under direct control of the RFS chain of command and are directed generally at the Fire Services systems of work.

#### Terms of Reference

##### **1. Review and report on the adequacy of the Fire Service's response to the Reedy Swamp fire in Bega that occurred on 18 March 2018 and subsequently impacted upon the township of Tathra.**

There were no comments relating directly to the response of the fire agencies, as those that provided comments advised they were not directly involved in the operation. As such, it would be inappropriate to make comment as it would likely be misinformed or hearsay.

There were general comments about RFS response systems as well as the approach that the Fire Brigade Employees Union (FBEU) undertook to raise issues. These can be summarised as:

- It was inappropriate for the FBEU to base its argument on a call log, as the log only shows part of the picture and can be quite easily misunderstood when not framed in context.
- It was inappropriate for the FBEU to comment when it did, as the incident was still in combat period and there are appropriate forums to raise issues, such as the Incident Debrief and After Action Review, at a local level through the Bush Fire Management Committee and at a senior level through the Joint Fire Services Committee.
- That the RFS should have in place a minimum training level for Duty Officers and that local staffing levels are appropriate in order to ensure a full complement of Incident Management Team (IMT) positions can be established.

#### Terms of Reference

##### **2. Review the call taking and dispatch arrangements of both Fire and Rescue NSW and NSW RFS across the State and make any recommendations to ensure they are best practice, address emerging technology and provide the best possible service delivery to the community of NSW.**

There were a number of comments in relation to the above point of the terms of reference. These can be themed into a number of categories that are listed below.

#### Working relationship

- Generally, whilst the working relationship on a whole is positive, it was noted there are structural and capability differences that can sometimes manifest into localised differences and issues on the ground.
- Fire and Rescue NSW and NSW RFS are both fire agencies. As such, there are detailed Mutual Aid Agreements for joint response to areas and/or incidents, the joint responses are based on the type of incident, the type of asset at threat, the risk of fire occurring in the area and threatening an asset or assets and the access to the area or asset.

#### The system

- Currently all fire/rescue/hazmat triple zero calls are received by the FRNSW Call Centre (Comsoen), the operator speaks with the caller, identifies location of incident and incident type.
- If the incident is within FRNSW area, the operator effectively clicks a button on the system which activates the FRNSW brigade. The details of the incident are automatically sent to the FRNSW Station and appliance/s.

- If the incident is within RFS area, the operator literally has to make another phone call to hand the incident to the RFS. This will be done amongst the operators receiving other triple-zero calls. Therefore, there is always a delay in RFS resources being called to every incident within RFS Area as the current system relies on manual intervention and is not automated to its full potential.
- Within the RFS there are generally three systems for receipt of triple-zero call from FRNSW:
  1. Directly to RFS District Staff at the Fire Control Centre during office hours. Outside of office hours the call will go to the RFS District Duty Officer at home or other locations (Note, there are a number of ways this can occur). The Staff Officer will then manage the incident as per the requirements of the NSW RFS District Duty Officer
  2. A contracted call centre receives the call and following set Standard Operating Procedures, dispatches resources and advises the RFS District Duty Officer of the incident and response or will clarify resources to be dispatched. The RFS District Duty Officer will then take and manage the incident.
  3. The call is directed to the RFS Operational Communications Centre (OCC) in RFS Headquarters where the RFS Computer Aided Dispatch (CAD) system is run from. The OCC Operator takes the call from the FRNSW operator, following set Standard Operating Procedures, dispatches resources and advises the RFS District Duty Officer of the incident and response or will clarify resources to be dispatched. The RFS District Duty officer has to be available on radio to provide operational advice and undertakes all reporting of incident.

#### The NSW RFS District Duty Officer

This role exists in every RFS district, along with an On Call Officer. The role is filled by a staff member, and occasionally a volunteer will assist with the role where there are shortages in staff numbers. The role is in addition to an employee's normal duties and is defined in 4.9 of the *Crown Employees (Rural Fire Service) Award 2016* as:

*"Duty Officer" means a staff member rostered for duty or operating after hours, as directed by the Commissioner (under the Rural Fires Act 1997), to serve as coordinator of the Commissioner's emergency response organisation by receiving and passing on reports and other information, alerting reserve resources when necessary, liaising with other organisations involved in emergency response and performing normal duties as required.*

The Duty Officer is responsible for receiving all triple-zero calls from FRNSW Call centre, determining the exact incident location, the appropriate resources to send, and organising the dispatch of resources. This can involve paging or ringing brigade members for their availability. The duty officer must then monitor, respond, act on all radio calls and phone calls. They must also manage the incident in accordance with incident procedures, manage logistics such as organising welfare for crews, input all reporting requirements into the Incident Control System (ICON).

During office hours, this work is often done in an office environment with the support and assistance of other staff, easy access to computers, radios and associated high speed networks.

Outside of office hours, this work is done at home, in an RFS Service vehicle or other locations. The requirement to be able to access the ICON system has forced the majority of district duty officers to be tied to their home premises when rostered on for duty. As they need to be able to promptly enter information into the ICON system as it is linked to the RFS public website, "fires near me" smart phone application and other community information access points. However, due to network issues in regional NSW, several volunteer Duty Officers are required to take their vehicle away from their house to control fires.

The District Duty Officer role has been operating since the inception of the NSW Rural Fire Service in 1997, whilst the fundamental processes of the role have not changed, the workload and requirements of the role have changed substantially. There are more calls, more types of calls, increased reporting requirements,

increased support and welfare requirements to brigades and volunteers. This role is performed alone, usually in an officer's personal premises, there are no systems to monitor the welfare of the Duty Officer. As an example, if the Duty Officer was home alone, which often happens as the family will go out on the weekend to escape the impost of the work, and the duty officer becomes incapacitated, it will most like lead to a missed triple-zero call, missed radio calls and no overall management of the incident.

In order for the District Duty Officer to be able to conduct the requirements of the position at their personal home premises, they generally have a space in their house set aside for the equipment and conducting incident management. They must have RFS radios installed, they must have reliable internet connection and a space for computer. In regional areas most Duty Officer homes have a dedicated secondary landline installed, as mobile phone coverage can be poor and unreliable. A space for log books to log calls and taking notes.

It should be noted that where District Duty Officers are not supported by contracted call centre or the RFS Central Dispatch, the Duty Officer is also responsible for monitoring the radio, receiving and responding non incident related radio calls, these calls can range from brigade activities, vehicle movements and larger district events.

On average, 50 per cent of triple-zero calls are received by the RFS after "normal working" hours or on weekends. Due to organisational culture and antiquated award conditions, the additional time is very rarely claimed by district staff, resulting in most district staff volunteering more time than our most active volunteers. The long-term impacts are readily seen through fatigue, health and family issues. The District Duty Officer role has an enormous amount of corporate risk and responsibility attached to its duties and in its current format is not sustainable, it does not deliver the best outcomes for the community of NSW and if known by the community it would be unacceptable.

#### **NSW RFS Central Dispatch Project**

Since 2011 NSW RFS has been slowly rolling out a Computer Aided Dispatch (CAD) system titled the NSW RFS Central Dispatch Project. The RFS CAD is run from the RFS Operation Centre (OCC) based in RFS Head Office in Lidcombe.

The process involves the RFS OCC Operator taking the call from the FRNSW operator, following set Standard Operating Procedures, dispatching resources and advising the RFS District Duty Officer of the incident and response or clarifying resources to be dispatched. The RFS District Duty officer has to be available on radio to provide operational advice and undertakes all reporting.

The RFS CAD system is a mix of technologies, there is a dispatch program that identifies resources to be dispatched when the incident location is entered into the system. However, the program calculates this based on line of site, not driving time to incident leading. This can lead to longer response times if not over ridden by the operator using local knowledge. Several incidents have been reported of vehicles closer by road not being deployed whilst vehicles further away have been deployed potentially leading to further loss of property and death.

The radio network into the OCC is generally run as one network, meaning the districts that are on the RFS CAD across the state are all talking on the one radio channel. At times the network can become very congested and busy. The radio network is able to be separated and "handed back" to districts to manage when operational activity increases.

The RFS CAD was initially designed to be a single point of contact for FRNSW Comscen to contact. It should be noted that in terms of the District Duty Officer, just knowing that someone is guaranteed to answer the triple-zero call removes an incredible amount of pressure from the Duty Officer. The Duty Officer can undertake family activities around the home, shower and go to the toilet without fear of missing a call.

Unfortunately, due to a number of constraints including budget, structural design of the system and the physical space required for the OCC, the roll out of the RFS CAD is slow and has not even reached 50 per cent of RFS districts.

### Reporting requirements

After the 2009 Victorian Black Saturday Fires, the reporting requirements about the incident, its management and progress have significantly increased. This is primarily because there is a need to push information out to the community so that they are adequately informed and can appropriately prepare and act to survive bush fire events.

The reporting is done by entering information into the RFS Incident Control System (ICON) at dictated time intervals depending on incident type, size, classification and alert status. ICON is linked to RFS public information access points such as the RFS Website, Fires Near Me smart phone application, a Facebook page and Twitter accounts. It is therefore imperative that the correct information in an understandable language is entered into the system.

Prior to the current requirements, only incidents classified as Notifiable under the NSW RFS Operational Management Procedure Notifiable Incidents had to be reported on to NSW RFS head office. These reports were generally over the phone and the incident types that required reporting were of significantly lesser occurrence.

The reporting requirements have added an enormous workload to the District Duty Officer role, considering the role is one person. Then there is a high level of risk something will be missed. The RFS maintains staff are only required to undertake minor and incidental follow up work. However, every incident now takes at least one hour from call to closing incident in ICON. In most areas, the average time from open to close is three hours.

The implementation of RFS CAD has not helped the reporting burden upon RFS District Duty Officer. They are still required to undertake all the reporting for each incident 24 hours a day, even though the OCC is taking the triple-zero and radio calls related to the incident. As such the RFS remains the only fire service in Australia that requires daytime staff to also manage the afterhours incident response.

### Technology

Both RFS and FRNSW utilise a number of technologies to receive and manage incident calls. Technology is constantly improving and the cost to upgrading and staying up to date with emerging technologies can be difficult given government constraints on agency budgets. The main points on technology are listed below:

- FRNSW utilise a fully automated CAD system that is linked with data terminals in fire appliances allowing fire fighters and incident controllers in the field to access live information regarding the incident and even the premises.
- The RFS process is very manual orientated and is not automated to its full potential. It does need to be noted that with automation there is potential loss of local knowledge. Manual processes take additional time.
- The RFS does not have vehicle tracking in place that allows for live monitoring of vehicle and appliance movements and locations.
- New technology needs to be useful, not just create another large amount of reporting.
- Technology must be easy to use at the volunteer end of the system as some brigades may only utilise the equipment on an adhoc basis.

### Other legal requirements

In NSW under the Rural Fires Act 1997, during the Bush Fire Danger Period it is a requirement to have a Fire Safety Permit to conduct any burning. In Rural Fire Service area, permits are issued by local volunteer brigades, the information on the permit (land owner details, location details, type of fire and when fire is to be lit) are recorded by RFS staff into the Bush Fire Risk Information System (BRIMS).

From BRIMS, RFS District Duty Officers are able to run reports on where fire permits are active, so that

if a triple-zero call is received, the call can be cross checked against the list of permits in that area to determine if the call is indeed a permit call and requires a response.

A requirement of the permit is that the permit holder must notify their neighbours and their fire authority (FRNSW if they live in FRNSW area or RFS if they live in RFS area) at least 24 hours before they light the fire. For those who live in RFS area, there is a number listed on the permit to call and notify their intention to burn. The requirement to notify the fire authority and neighbours actually exists all year round, even when fire safety permits are not required.

However, FRNSW, for longstanding reasons has abstained from issuing fire permits. Therefore, generally, residents who live in FRNSW area are not able to obtain fire safety permits. Furthermore, unless the FRNSW Station is a rostered on station (crew at station during set times for set days) then there is no ability for residents within FRNSW area to notify their fire authority in accordance with legislative requirements.

Historically boundary areas of each agency have been determined on the capacity to respond to incidents and incident types based on the demographic and risk of those areas. However, other community needs such as fire safety permits are not taken into account. If FRNSW cannot issue permits and have a process for burn notifications then it is arguable if they are delivering the best outcomes for the community.

Over recent years the RFS has increased its capacity to conduct legal processes against offenders, such as those burning without a permit or burning without notifying. This has resulted in offenders being issued with warning and infringements. FRNSW have not done this, and whilst they may attend and extinguish illegal fires, there is no follow up to ensure offenders are held accountable and counselled to reduce the offence being committed again.

There is significant cross over of increased workload for RFS due to the failure of FRNSW to issue permits diminishing compliance across the state.

### Recommendations

The following is a list of possibilities that could be utilised immediately or into the future as recommended by members.

- An independent call centre that receives triple-zero calls and dispatches appliances of both agencies. This will remove any bias from either agency and will ensure that there is one common method being utilised by both agencies.
- Removal of the District Duty Officer operating at home to address fatigue and corporate risk.
- Implementation of vehicle tracking systems for both agencies to allow for live location of resources. Live tracking of aircraft and other resources already occurs.
- A review of the boundary determination process so that its inclusive of all legislative requirements, delivering the best outcomes for the community. If residents in bushfire-prone areas are unable to reduce their risk by use of fire permits because of an agency issue, then the best outcome is not being delivered.
- A strong engagement with district staff regarding the potentially significant change in the role of District Duty Officer. That they will be critical to the successful transition to whatever system is finally implemented.
- An acceptance that there are a wide variety of Rural Brigades and their ability to respond can be at significantly different rates.
- A detailed policy on activation of duty officers, on call officers and activation of Incident Management Team positions as incidents escalate.
- That a recommendation is provided by this inquiry that legislation is drafted to ensure that fire-management staff are exempted from government efficiency dividends and reductions.

## ATTACHMENT M

**From:** Simon Kempson [REDACTED]  
**Sent:** Tuesday, 14 January 2020 11:10 AM  
**To:** Julie-Ann Bond [REDACTED]  
**Cc:** Nathan Bradshaw [REDACTED]; Michael Sinclair [REDACTED]; Stewart Little [REDACTED]; Atticus Fleming [REDACTED]; Robert Quirk [REDACTED]; Naomi Stephens [REDACTED]; Sally Friedlander [REDACTED]; Nicole Grice [REDACTED]; Melanie Cocca [REDACTED]; Michael Demetriou [REDACTED]; Sharyn Gallagher [REDACTED]; Bill Murray [REDACTED]  
**Subject:** Mental Health of Workers in current Bushfires

Hi Julie

I refer to a letter received by Atticus Fleming Deputy Secretary NPWS from Stewart Little dated 10 January 2020. I have sought advice from NPWS senior management and they advised a range of measures have been put in place which are set out below.

- Under our Zero in Parks initiative, NPWS has a goal to get everyone home, without harm, every time.
- In July 2019, NPWS established a peer support program to enhance our response to reduce mental health impacts.
- We established partnerships with the Rural Fire Services, NSW Fire and Rescue, Phoenix Australia and Access EAP. We now have 16 peer support people trained in mental health first aid and psychological first aid.
- Peer support personnel have been deployed to all the major control centres and incident management teams including Armidale, Glen Innes, Hawkesbury, Bulga, Wauchope, Kempsey, Taree, Gloucester, Port Macquarie, Nowra, Ulladula, Batemans Bay, Eden, Cooma, Tumut, Jindabyne, Oberon, Wollindilly, Mudgee, Lithgow, Katoomba.
- Support has been extended to members of the public and other agencies during their deployment
- Our Peer Support program operates in conjunction with EAP Support, which is free and available to staff 24/7. The peer support staff report high levels of engagement, and we are receiving very positive feedback from staff on their involvement.
- Staff can also access any of the onsite critical incident support services provided by other agencies such as RFS and Fire and Rescue NSW, including Chaplaincy Services.
- We have commenced developing medium and long-term strategies to enhance the support we provide our staff, particularly in response to this bushfire season. This includes working with Access EAP and psychologists to prepare a support plan to ensure staff are supported mentally and emotionally post fire operations.
- We continue to prioritise fatigue management as a key issue for staff safety. NPWS has deployed safety advisors (fatigue management) to a number of larger fire operations to assist incident management teams identify areas of fatigue management risks and help establish fatigue controls.
- Branches continue to review deployments and provide fatigue management strategies by returning staff to normal work duties and ensuring stand down days are taken where staff are encouraged to rest. Fatigue management has also formed part of the daily fire operations briefings and staff are continually reminded to speak up if they are fatigued.



- Fatigue and staff wellbeing remains a key focus the NPWS leadership team, who are meeting regularly to reflect on incident reports, staff feedback and any staff concerns and design response strategies.
- To support this focus, Directors, managers and supervisors are contacting staff directly to check on welfare and seek feedback on how they are going and any concerns. To feed back into our review processes

In addition to these measures the Public Service Commission is meeting on a weekly basis with all agencies to discuss various measures that can be put in place in addition to those that are currently available. This includes the provision of trauma counselling at key locations around the State that can be used by all agencies involved in the response. The Department will continue to examine this issue as a high priority given the scale and coverage of the bushfires and its impact across our broader Department.

In the meantime if the PSA has any knowledge of staff who are showing signs of poor mental health as a result of fatigue or trauma we would appreciate being advised of those details so that we can consider direct intervention where that is warranted.

The Department accepts that it is incumbent upon all parties to work together to ensure that we manage this issue in a timely, effective, compassionate and appropriate manner. Your continued assistance in meeting that goal is appreciated.

Should you wish to discuss this further, please do not hesitate to contact me and I can connect you with the relevant staff who are managing this issue on a continual basis across the Department.

Kind Regards

**Simon Kempson**

**Director Industrial Relations**

People, Performance & Culture | Department of Planning, Industry and Environment

[REDACTED] | E [REDACTED]

161 Kite Street Orange NSW 2800

[www.dpie.nsw.gov.au](http://www.dpie.nsw.gov.au)

## ATTACHMENT N

-----Original Message-----

From: Commissioners Office [REDACTED]  
Sent: Monday, 13 January 2020 3:21 PM  
To: Lesley Twigger [REDACTED]  
Subject: RE: Mental Health of Workers dealing with the current Bushfire crisis

Dear Ms Twigger

Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons has asked me to acknowledge receipt of Mr Little's letter of 10 January 2020.

The matters raised will receive appropriate attention and a response will be forwarded as soon as possible.

Yours sincerely

Jo-Anne Robson | Executive Assistant to the Commissioner NSW RURAL FIRE SERVICE Headquarters 4  
Murray Rose Ave, Sydney Olympic Park NSW 2127 | Locked Bag 17 Granville NSW 2142 P [REDACTED]  
F [REDACTED] E [REDACTED]  
[www.rfs.nsw.gov.au](http://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au) | [www.facebook.com/nswrfs](https://www.facebook.com/nswrfs) | [www.twitter.com/nswrfs](https://www.twitter.com/nswrfs) PREPARE. ACT. SURVIVE.

-----Original Message-----

From: Lesley Twigger [REDACTED]  
Sent: Monday, 13 January 2020 12:06 PM  
To: Shane Fitzsimmons [REDACTED]  
Subject: Mental Health of Workers dealing with the current Bushfire crisis

Dear Commissioner

Please find attached letter from PSA General Secretary, Stewart Little, in regard to the above.

Kind regards  
Lesley Twigger

Lesley Twigger  
PSA Secretariat  
[REDACTED]

# ATTACHMENT O

Unclassified



File ref. no: D19/36  
Doc. ref. no: D20/4791

Mr Stewart Little  
General Secretary  
Public Service Association of NSW  
160 Clarence St  
Sydney NSW 2000

24 January 2020

Dear Mr Little, *Stewart*

Thank you for your letter in respect of mental health services and support during the current and extensive bushfire season.

Fire and Rescue NSW (FRNSW) is very appreciative of the efforts of all of our staff who have gone above and beyond in respect of responding to the range of bushfire events and supporting the Rural Fire Service and the community of NSW.

FRNSW has a range of mental health, wellbeing and critical incident support programs and services available for all staff, which are embedded into our safety management system. In summary, these include:

- Fatigue Management Framework - FRNSW have established a framework to manage and reduce the risk of fatigue at work. The framework provides organisational and personal information, instruction and guidance on managing fatigue. This includes a Fatigue Management Policy, associated procedures, guidelines and a tool kit for supporting staff, managing risk and the provision of information and practical guidance about fatigue and its management.
- Access to the Resilience at Work (RAW) Mind Coach Program, which is an online resilience program, designed to equip staff with a range of support and guided mindfulness exercises, the purpose which is to support and improve psychological wellbeing and resilience.
- EAP Program, which offers an independent external service, providing professional and confidential counselling for a broad range of issues that may affect the health, safety and work performance of all employees.

Fire and Rescue NSW

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Page 1 of 2

Unclassified

**Unclassified**

- Peer Support – FRNSW has over 100 peer support officers (PSO). They are permanent, retained, retired and administrative staff members who volunteer their time to provide informal mental health support to their colleagues within FRNSW.

In light of the recent workload and exposure to challenging operational environments FRNSW will also be offering those staff actively involved with the bushfire response, access to FRNSW's targeted Well Check program which has been progressively implemented across a number of high risk areas of FRNSW over the past 5 years. These sessions are facilitated by a consultant Psychologist with experience assisting staff from emergency services agencies. Some specialist staff deployed to support operations in the bushfires in northern NSW at the end of 2019 have already been through this program.

Should you require any additional information or would like to discuss this further please do not hesitate to contact Senior IR Strategist, John Andreallo in the first instance on [REDACTED] or by email [REDACTED]

Yours sincerely,



Michael Baldi  
Executive Director People & Culture

# ATTACHMENT P



14 January 2020

Mr Stewart Little  
General Secretary  
Public Service Association of NSW  
GPO Box 3365  
SYDNEY NSW 2001

Dear Mr Little

Thank you for your letter of 10 January 2020, in relation to the availability of mental health support services for NSW State Emergency Service (NSW SES) employees during the current bushfire emergency.

I appreciate your concern for the welfare of your members and thank you for raising these with me.

I can assure you the health, safety and wellbeing of our employees and volunteers is, and will continue to be, the number one priority for the NSW SES. I am pleased to outline information below on support employees during this operational response and as part of the NSW SES Health and Wellbeing Framework.

NSW SES is currently part of a multi-agency peer support strategy further to bush fire and recovery operations. We have recently deployed Peer Support Officers and Chaplains to Nowra, Ulladulla, Batemans Bay, Moruya, Cobargo, Bermagui, Bega and Queanbeyan to provide mental health support services to both our local members and out of area staff/members currently on deployment. Our Work Health and Safety Team are continuing to monitor the situation closely and are currently planning further deployments to fire affected areas within NSW and support for our State Headquarters staff.

Further to the increased support and attention, all employees have access to highly trained Peer Support Officers and Chaplains 24 hours per day, 7 days per week by phoning 1800 626 800. Additionally, employees can access our Employee Assistance Program and up to six sessions of clinical psychological support annually, via face to face or phone. We are also able to facilitate additional sessions if required, on a case-by-case basis.



STATE HEADQUARTERS  
OFFICE OF THE COMMISSIONER  
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ABN: 88 712 649 015

-2-

We recently issued an all agency Safety Reminder titled *Mental Health Check in* (Ref 2020/01) to our staff and volunteers outlining the support services available, and also the physical and emotional indicators to monitor.

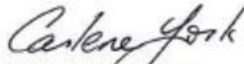
NSW SES is actively monitoring hours of work, as we do particularly during prolonged operations, to ensure that our staff have access to rest and recuperation. The Operational Fatigue Management Procedure provides guidance in the management of these issues.

The NSW SES would welcome specific examples relating to any issues adversely affecting the health and wellbeing of our staff, so that these can be appropriately addressed. Confidential referrals or information can be provided to Sharene Quayle, Senior Manager WHS, via email at

[REDACTED] I have additionally requested NSW SES Director People & Development, Natasa Mitic, contact Ms Julie Bond as your nominated contact.

Please do not hesitate to contact me should you have any further queries.

Yours sincerely



Carlene York APM  
Commissioner  
NSW State Emergency Service