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Subject Morwell Mine Fire Submission

1 attachment



VFBV-Submission-to-Hazelwood-Mine-Fire-Inquiry.pdf

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Content of submission (you can choose multiple): Measures taken by
Hazelwood Coal Mine to prevent fire, Response to fire by Emergency
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12 May, 2014

Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry Submissions
PO Box 3460
Gippsland MC Vic 3841

Dear Board Members

SUBJECT: VFBV SUBMISSION TO HAZELWOOD MINE FIRE INQUIRY

Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria (VFBV), the body established in the CFA Act as representing Victoria's 60,000 CFA volunteers, thanks you for the opportunity to provide input to this important Inquiry.

The Hazelwood Mine Fire is another reminder of issues of importance not only to the community and personnel on the fireground, but also to the future of the emergency services in Victoria.

CFA at a glance

CFA brigades provide services to 60% of suburban Melbourne, regional cities and all of country Victoria every day and night of the year. CFA's 1206 volunteer brigades (~30 of these supported and supplemented by paid on shift firefighters) and staff who work with and in support of these brigades provide a network service model, delivering services at the local community level and also escalating major incident response capacity at a broader geographical or state level as circumstances require. Each year CFA's qualified and highly skilled volunteers and paid firefighters respond to thousands of house and industrial fires, grass and bushfires, industrial incidents, hazardous materials events, road and marine incidents, medical response support and a vast array of other emergencies in their communities. CFA volunteers are on call around the clock. They are supported and supplemented by ~1,300 operational and support staff, including paid firefighters strategically located to work with and in support of ~30 busier CFA brigades servicing densely populated areas. CFA is a volunteer based organisation, in which volunteers are supported by paid employees in a fully integrated manner. This means that allocation of operational roles in CFA is intended to be determined by the ability, competence and availability of a CFA member to undertake that role with no differentiation between the roles that career firefighters & volunteer firefighters can perform.

Key issues submitted by VFBV

VFBV has not had an opportunity to review Hazelwood Mine Fire formal incident debrief findings and therefore the focus of this submission is on several broader issues based on direct involvement with the incident, feedback from our volunteer members and a strategic reflection on some matters we believe to be of importance to your inquiry.

In particular we seek to ensure your inquiry considers the following:

- The absolute importance of Victoria's emergency service network maintaining the CFA's volunteer based surge and sustain capacity and capability for large and protracted incidents.

- The importance of adequate protection for all firefighters (paid and volunteer alike) who, due to the nature of their work, are exposed to uncontrolled, unpredictable and highly toxic working environments;
- The need for continued and additional effort to improve Victoria's emergency sector arrangements to ensure effective utilisation of existing and available volunteer resources. Particularly with regard to utilisation of volunteers already trained and experienced in volunteer incident management roles, utilisation of volunteers already trained and available to operate specialist and technical firefighting vehicles/equipment, and training of additional volunteers willing to acquire skills required to operate specialist vehicles/equipment; and
- Emergency sector responsibility, accountability, enforcement and administration arrangements required to improve fire prevention across the whole landscape

The Inquiry should also recognise the recent progress to evolve a more networked emergency sector and through this an ability to maintain a sustained 'all agency' joined up response to the Hazelwood Mine Fire incident and the mutual support between fire agencies to maintain local service delivery.

Situational context of Hazelwood Mine Fire

Before discussing several specific issues, it is important to note the context within which the Hazelwood Fire occurred, and to recognise the enormity of the deployment effort on 9 February and the weeks surrounding that day, not just at Hazelwood, but across the state.

During the summer of 2013/14, CFA responded to the most intense fire period since 2009, dealing with more than 4,500 fires that burned 460,000 ha of public and private land, destroyed infrastructure and caused significant community disruption. Between December 2013 and March 2014, Victoria had 19 days of extreme and severe fire danger rating and 16 days of Total Fire Ban.

In the days and months leading to the Hazelwood Mine Fire and in the weeks following, a series of major fires affected the state.

- CFA maintained a significant commitment to NSW fires early in the season
- The Grampians fires from mid-January burned more than 50,000 hectares and prompted the state's first official Recommendation to Evacuate at Halls Gap, sending 500 residents from their homes. There were as many as 700 firefighters on the ground at any time and the fires north and west of Hall's Gap threatened the communities of Wartook, Heathvale and Laharum;
- Fires in the Mallee, initiated by multiple lightning strikes on 14 January, burned for a month and called for up to 700 personnel at a time;
- Between 9 and 14 February, fire destroyed nearly 50 homes across the state with the Mickleham/Kilmore complex threatening the communities of Gisborne, Warrandyte, Wallan, Kilmore and surrounding towns. At any given time, more than 200 fire trucks and hundreds of crew members were committed to those fires. With the fires so close to the metropolitan area, Police and Emergency Services Minister Kim Wells credited firefighters with saving 5,000 houses. At the time, The Age estimated the Mickleham/Kilmore Complex alone was a threat to the lives or safety of 13,000 Victorians;
- Fires in East Gippsland burned over 120,000 hectares, placing small communities including Bonang, Deddick, Goongerah and Tubbut under threat for more than six weeks.
- In south Gippsland, fire impacted an estimated 5,000 ha in the Strzelecki Ranges near the town of Yarram;

- Over 24 hours on February 9, Victoria recorded 954 emergency incidents, almost six times more than on a normal summer day. By 9.30 pm on February 10, more than 100 fires were burning out of control, with multiple large scale incidents demanding a firefighting force of hundreds of firefighters each.
- While Hazelwood burned, nearby fires continued to threaten the outskirts of Morwell and smaller towns in surrounding areas. 30,000 homes in western Gippsland were left without power, while a large fire in plantation forests and stockpiles of timber and woodchips threatened the Maryvale Paper Mill which, along with the power industry, is one of the region's major employers.

The Hazelwood Open Cut Mine fire added significantly to the already intensive demands on the state's emergency services – reports from the Fire Services Commissioner indicate more than 7,000 individual firefighters were involved over the 45 days of intensive firefighting required before the site was declared safe. In addition there was also significant contribution by paid staff and volunteers from many other agencies such as VicSES who played an important incident support role at staging areas and so on.

Maintaining CFA volunteer 'surge and sustain' capacity

The Hazelwood Mine Fire was a major incident in its own right, but also a part of a demanding period that called upon the CFA volunteer surge capacity – the ability to field thousands of trained, experienced firefighters at short notice at the same time as maintaining normal day to day service delivery.

One of the fundamental benefits of the CFA volunteer based model is the depth of capacity and capability it provides to maintain response across Victoria to widespread, large scale, multiple and concurrent emergencies whilst maintaining local fire cover for the rest of Victoria. This capacity was on show during the Hazelwood Mine Fire. The efforts of all emergency sector personnel, both paid and volunteer, over the 45 days of the Hazelwood mine fire and other emergencies at that time was enormous and is to be commended.

This capacity to provide surge response and sustain it over long periods relies on dedicated, trained and prepared paid and volunteer professionals across the entire emergency service network but certainly would not be possible without a substantial, highly trained, ready to mobilise, volunteer front line response and major incident management capability. VFBV calls on the Inquiry to take special note to identify and resolve any findings that could positively contribute to optimising this volunteer capability.

At all times and particularly in peak demand periods, it is important to know what resources are available; know what resources have been deployed and for what task; to be able to track where deployed resources are; and to plan ahead for forthcoming activation. This is an area repeatedly raised as a frustration by volunteers and raised as a concern during the Hazelwood Mine Fire. Feedback to VFBV, particularly in the early stages of this incident, indicated that some resources were deployed and underutilised; there was confusion with resource requests and confusion at times regarding where resources were; and there were trained and available CFA volunteer incident management and field command resources not called despite requests being made to other agencies and interstate.

Too often there is a tendency toward a generalisation that volunteers are not available or do not have the time to commit for protracted incidents or specialised roles even when this is due to poor incident planning; last minute or afterthought resource requests; a lack of knowledge about what is available; and/or lack of effort to activate or develop capable volunteer resources. If such a

generalisation is permitted to flourish, over time there will be a gradual erosion of volunteer capability and potentially in the future an inability for Victoria to cope with circumstances as presented during January and February this year.

In addition to a long term need to ensure the emergency sector develops a culture, policies and organisational approaches that proactively maintain and strengthen Victoria's volunteer capability, a better resource and deployment tracking system, able to be accessed and updated by local CFA Groups/Brigades/volunteers is needed now. CFA's human resource capability is managed from the local Group/Brigade level and it is from this point that CFA resource requests are managed. Any resource and deployment tracking system must have the functionality to build from this bottom up knowledge and coordination point.

Feedback received by VFBV prior to, during and subsequent to the Hazelwood fire (and also via successive major fire debriefing processes) suggests there is a need for a functional, local Group/Brigade/volunteer accessible, resource tracking and deployment system. Such a system must be capable of identifying existing volunteer resource capability (individuals skills, roles, endorsements, experience etc); recording volunteer future availability at least for identified known peak demand expectations/forecasts; tracking response preparedness, advance scheduling and supporting deployment; monitoring how well the available volunteer resource is being utilised; and facilitating proactive local and state-wide advance resource planning, preparedness and response.

Once implemented an improved resource tracking and deployment system should be applied to facilitate improved forward planning and notification of potential deployment need; speed up the process between incident resource requirement decision and notification/request to CFA Groups/Brigades to activate resources; and maximise the spread of the response burden across the available resource base. These improvements will help toward ensuring the volunteer based CFA model can cope with peak workload and protracted major incident demands well into the future. There will always be pressures on volunteers' time so good planning and efficient use of their time and skills is fundamental.

Another issue frequently raised, and again raised in the context of the Hazelwood Mine Fire is the need for better tasking of personnel. Once resources have been requested and activated it is equally important to ensure rapid, and productively focussed deployment of those resources at the incident and on the fire ground. The Hazelwood mine fire presented specific safety requirements and necessary precautions were warranted. Within this justifiable safety constraint however there is also a need to maintain adequate focus on effective use of the time available during each deployment cycle. When deployed firefighters are 'mucked around' it is damaging to morale, a disincentive for them returning to another shift cycle and possibly a lost opportunity to get maximum effect from the firefighting effort.

Arrangements to ensure effective utilisation of existing and available volunteer capability.

There are many senior CFA Volunteers trained, experienced, qualified and accredited in the performance of fire and emergency roles from front line firefighter right through to Level 3 Incident Controller. However, there seemed to be a tendency to ignore experienced and qualified volunteers for assignment to senior incident management, field command roles and for manning of specialist appliances. The adage "Use them or lose them" is apt in this situation.

Apart from a missed resource capability at this and other incidents, there are implications for the future. To maintain their up to date qualifications, volunteers endorsed for senior incident management and field command roles need to meet requisite up to date experience levels. Deny qualified volunteers senior incident management or field command roles in major emergencies, then

you are likely to erode the willingness of these highly trained personnel to continue in these roles; or they may lose their accreditation for future deployment in such roles when they are needed.

The same can be said for a host of other roles including operation of specialist and technical firefighting vehicles/equipment, which volunteers have performed in the past or can be trained to perform to the benefit of our emergency response capacity. Such exclusion of opportunity to undertake these roles appears to us to be contrary to the letter as well as spirit of the CFA Act as well as detrimental to Victoria's capacity.

Feedback to VFBV suggests volunteers were underutilised in incident management and field command roles during the Hazelwood Mine Fire. There was an underutilisation of volunteers in the operation of specialist firefighting vehicles and a missed opportunity to have even more volunteers trained to operate these firefighting vehicles due to lack of concerted effort over recent years to train willing and available volunteers in the operation of these vehicles. VFBV believes there are still significant cultural issues surrounding the acceptance, respect and recognition of volunteers' skill and experience in incidents involving both paid and volunteer personnel. VFBV requests that the Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry team explore the organisational or work practice restrictions to fully utilising trained volunteer field command capability particularly at incidents involving the deployment of both volunteers and paid personnel.

The under-utilisation of volunteers in specialist firefighting vehicles/equipment and incident management and field command roles is a recurring concern and needs attention. Similar issues were also raised by VFBV during the 2009 Bushfires Royal Commission.

CFA training focus needs to be improved with more focus given to encouraging and training volunteers to operate specialist firefighting vehicles. CFA should also seek to broaden the network of volunteers trained to operate these specialist firefighting vehicles and establish more flexibility with the way crews can be blended to operate various firefighting equipment across the CFA fleet. For example a specialist firefighting vehicle may be located in one brigade but volunteers from surrounding brigades could also be trained to operate that vehicle – expanding the resource pool for protracted and specialist incidents such as the Hazelwood Mine fire. VFBV requests that the Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry team explore gaps in CFA processes and accountability management to train volunteers in the use of specialist/firefighting vehicles/equipment and/or any organisational or work practice restrictions to this occurring.

Victoria cannot meet its emergency response needs without maintaining the skill, level of engagement and numbers of its volunteers, from the newly trained members of front line crews, through the more experienced volunteers operating specialist firefighting vehicle, to the top level Incident Controllers.

The people of Victoria expect, deserve and need a volunteer emergency resource that is professional, has frequently used skills and is ready to go at any time; exclusion or underutilisation at incidents such as the Hazelwood Mine Fire only works to erode that volunteer resource and its condition.

Firefighter health and safety and adequacy of protection

This is a major concern for VFBV. The potential for and presence of unidentified or unknown agents that can affect the health of any firefighter in the subject mine fire is high.

Despite this, firefighters deployed into the mine in the early stages of the fire were not provided with sufficient protection such as breathing apparatus (BA).

The management of risk to firefighters working in the open cut was gradually ramped up, suggesting it had been initially inadequate; the monitoring of chemical hazards was stepped up at the request

of VFBV and others. In the early stages of the fire VFBV requested there be a more independent and transparent audit monitoring of firefighter health and safety. Following this request the Fire Service Commissioner engaged an independent monitor to review the safety procedures in place and required at and around the Hazelwood Mine Fire. VFBV noted the improvements that followed this appointment. Whilst many improvements were made, VFBV raised concern about the adequacy of protection for fire fighters and remains concerned about the potential for firefighters to have been exposed to dangerous toxins. Being a brown coal fire environment, there is potential for exposure to gases other than carbon monoxide and real potential for exposure to gases and other substance specific risks dependent on the location of a firefighter within the open cut, combustion patterns and resultant gas/substance concentration pockets. These exposures are hard to predict, hard to detect and hard to monitor.

Record keeping to do with volunteer exposures to high risk incidents such as the Hazelwood Mine Fire, as with other major fire and chemical exposure events, is clearly inadequate for the purposes of monitoring any long term effects or assessing resulting compensation claims; volunteer crews despatched to the incident will only be recorded as having attended that incident, whether they worked in the open cut mine or, as some were destined to do, dealt with multiple calls in the surrounding area. Individual specific exposure will not be known and will be difficult for any firefighter to prove at a later date should they become ill years down the track.

Notwithstanding the above broad concerns, the efforts of CFA's Health Monitoring Team supported by Ambulance Victoria and others was substantial and should be recognised.

We submit that the Inquiry examine and report on:

- the sufficiency of protection for firefighters engaged in the Mine firefight from the start;
- hazardous agents present during the firefight
- the sufficiency of the fire services monitoring and reporting on potential and actual threats to firefighter health; and,
- the fire services' overall occupational health management of the incident.

Emergency sector responsibility, accountability, enforcement and administration arrangements required to improve fire prevention across the whole landscape

VFBV assumes the Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry team will consider the arrangement required to clarify and improve assignment of responsibility and accountability for managing fire prevention in the Hazelwood Mine context, including responsibilities of the Hazelwood Mine owner/operator. There is a need for clearer lines of authority and responsibility for the prevention of fire across the landscape, including special and high risk environments such as the Hazelwood Mine and including owner/operator obligations.

VFBV is available to provide any further assistance required by the Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry team and/or to discuss any of the issues raised in this submission at your convenience.

Sincerely



Andrew Ford
Chief Executive Officer
Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria