



# AWU Victorian Branch

Submission to the Fire Services Review

31 August 2015

## **Summary of recommendations**

**The AWU Victorian Branch requests immediate action to remedy the inconsistency that sees DELWP firefighters who protect the public estate not categorised as emergency service workers with the associated benefits of personal recognition, appropriate payments and benefits.**

**Immediate action should be taken to ensure the interoperability of the CFA, MFB, DELWP and Parks Victoria in all fuel reduction and firefighting activities.**

**Any shift to a risk-based program of fuel reduction should be accompanied by a comprehensive and inclusive period of consultation between DELWP, its employees and the AWU Victorian Branch to ensure sufficient numbers of firefighters are hired and health & safety standards are upheld.**

**Formal processes should be put in place for the sharing of best practice research, decision-making in the commissioning of future research and the collation of available data.**

## **Background**

The AWU in Victoria has represented public sector workers in the bush for more than a century. The names of relevant departments have changed, but ultimately similar work arrangements continued throughout.

It should be stated from the outset that public sector firefighters have performed with distinction in all manner of fire and other natural catastrophes. Firefighters have lost their lives in the protection of the public estate, and have served with courage and distinction at the worst of times in the state's history.

On Black Saturday, DSE firefighters saved many lives as they battled the fury of the fires. Their role was not highlighted in the public eye because their work was characteristically deep behind fire-lines, far from the media gaze. Their distinctive green overalls rarely captured media attention.

The relevant department is now the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) and the issues remain the same for this under-recognised and under-resourced member of the Victorian emergency services sector.

It should be highlighted that these firefighters are not classed as emergency service workers, and as such, do not receive the recognition, the rewards or benefits of other professional firefighters. This is an anomaly which should be corrected immediately if the fire security of this state is to be prioritised, as Victorians have made abundantly clear it should be.

Questions of the interoperability of the fire services date back to the Bushfires Royal Commission, and beyond, when duplications combined with weaknesses of leadership in the face of a catastrophe previously beyond the imaginings of most Victorians.

## **DELWP must be recognised as an emergency service**

DELWP firefighters work for between nine and 10 months of the year on fuel reduction (including controlled burns) and fire suppression. They often operate in close co-operation with Parks Victoria, which is its partner in delivering emergency services, and the CFA.

There are a number of disadvantages in not being categorised as an emergency service worker. The most obvious is that DELWP firefighters risk their lives on fire-lines, sometimes working metres from Park Victoria firefighters, for example, who do receive an hourly allowance when doing this dangerous work. An emergency service allowance should be paid immediately for all professional public sector firefighters.

DELWP firefighters should have access to Emergency Services Superannuation, which is the right of all emergency service workers in the state, and which provides many advantages that those engaged in such dangerous pursuits need and deserve. The scheme allows greater opportunity for salary sacrifice, has a higher employer contribution and appropriate insurance provisions.

While these are practical advantages that DELWP firefighters should be sharing with their counterparts in other organisations, there is also the matter of recognition and the dignity it would bring to men and women who risk their lives and well-being at work.

It is a matter of disappointment, and even distress to many that they are not widely publicly recognised for their contribution to the state. This is despite the tacit recognition of their status in government discussion.

### **They provide emergency service**

The underlying assumption in all state government communication, whether it be a media release, a job advertisement or a report or review, is that DELWP (and predecessor departments including DSE and DEPI) is a partner in the emergency services sector, its contribution often indivisible from that of the MFB and the CFA.

- When NSW needed support from Victorian firefighters to manage a widespread fire crisis in October 2013 it was the CFA, MFB, DEPI, SES and Parks Victoria personnel who were sent to answer the call.
- The Fire Services Reform Program which aimed to “achieve real and sustainable change so the community is better served by Victoria’s fire services in the future” included the CFA, MFB and DSE in its considerations.
- DELWP’s own website leaves no doubt that its firefighters are emergency service workers; there are countless examples where this is assumed. To cite just one, in April 2015, DELWP’s Loddon Mallee Fire Land and Regional Manager Scott Falconer on the department’s website issued a warning about the need for extra vigilance during predicted extreme conditions for an approaching weekend. He refers to “emergency services” as gearing up for extreme conditions. It is implicit in the statement that DELWP is one of those emergency services.

- In August 2015, Emergency Management Victoria (EMV) acknowledged the international recognition of DELWP's role as an emergency service provider when a contingent of 104 Australians sent to Canada to help battle more than 5,000 wildfires returned home. The largest contingent came from Victoria and included representatives of CFA, DELWP and Parks Victoria.
- EMV held a Regional Controllers Workshop in May 2015 (ahead of the 2015-16 fire season) which included representatives from the CFA, MFB, DELWP, Parks Victoria, Victoria Police and the SES. EMV Commissioner Craig Lapsley spoke about the complexities of the multi-agency approach and said it was "only possible to get joined up outcomes for a common purpose through the energy and knowledge of the regions".
- The Emergency Management Strategic Action Plan 2015-18 has been developed to "guide all-hazard, all-agency reform" to meet the challenges for the sector. DELWP, incorporating Parks Victoria, is one of the organisations charged with the responsibility for meeting all that lies ahead.

### **DELWP deals with all manner of emergencies**

Outside, and sometimes during fire season, DELWP field officers also deal with complex issues such as biosecurity incursions, rapid and dangerous increases in pest populations (such as mice), and contamination of horticultural products and livestock. Name a public crisis in a regional area and the chances are that DELWP workers have assisted; from flood, to trapped whales, to drinking water contamination, their know-how, courage and determination are much sought-after.

- In April 2015, while the state held its breath awaiting the fate of an autistic 11-year old lost in bush near Eildon for days, DELWP field officers were part of the search for him. Their knowledge of the bush is second to none. They were the first to reach the lad, who mercifully survived his ordeal.
- On 26 August 2015, DELWP field officers were briefed along with other emergency services on the last known movements of a female hiker lost on Mt Baw Baw. By dusk, police were about to call off the search for the night, but it was DELWP workers, once again using their expert knowledge and understanding, who were part of the group that found tracks leading to her rescue soon after.

No front page thanks for them, but the sense of satisfaction for those involved was immense. These are people whose dedication and decency is beyond compare. It is wrong that these unassuming guardians of the public estate should be pushed aside and not given the recognition of their emergency service.

### **Extreme roles**

The dangerous and demanding nature of the work done by DELWP firefighters should be self-explanatory. They fight 95% of the bushfires in Victoria each year. Their knowledge and experience in handling dangerous trees, heavy machinery, aircraft drops in extreme conditions, backburning and operating on steep terrain is increasingly called on to assist the CFA. Their work is diverse, dangerous and challenging.

During the last fire season there was more than one example of DELWP firefighters going where others simply do not have the experience to operate. In one instance, DELWP firefighters were assisting on a CFA incident when CFA members were directed off the fireline at sunset. It was deemed too dangerous for them to work any longer that day because of steep terrain and dangerous trees. DELWP firefighters continued into the night.

These are people accustomed to getting a call at any hour, instructing them to report for duty in short time and to expect to be away from home for anything from seven to 10 days. Indeed, in the first attack on a fire it is not unusual for them to work a 24-hour or even 28-hour shift.

Selection criteria for project firefighters with DELWP and PV include availability to be on standby for an immediate return to work at any time during the employment period, with a preferred maximum response time of 20 minutes. Workers should be available to travel to other regions within the state or interstate.

Victorian Government literature says DELWP plays a “major role” in the state’s emergency response activities “through an all hazards, all agencies approach”. DELWP job ads tell would-be candidates about the tough working conditions they will encounter, such as heat and other weather extremes, and long shifts, as well as tasks including endurance walking, lifting, handling or movement of heavy and awkward objects. Potential candidates are warned that they will be operating in environments subject to extreme heat, dust, smoke, pollens and chemical and biological agents. DELWP firefighters must meet elite fitness standards before they are assigned to duty.

As well as passing specified tests, recently some workers suffering from diabetes, asthma and those who carry an EpiPen for the treatment of anaphylaxis have been told they will not be allowed to work on the fireline in the 2015-16 season. Whether or not these people are deemed to have their conditions under control, they have been told they will not be able to fight fires. This in itself is acknowledgment of the broad-ranging responsibilities enacted in extreme conditions that are often dangerous, unpredictable and physically demanding to say the least.

DELWP and PV employ Project Firefighters each summer for prevention and suppression of bushfires in the state’s National Parks, State Forests and Protected Land - this makes up about one-third of Victoria. They work for fixed terms of either 18, 26 or 34 weeks a year. They are based across 82 work centres located in six regions.

Anyone who has not been in a bushfire may not understand the rapid decision-making processes necessary for firefighters to protect themselves, and their fellow workers, while battling to save the public estate. It would be too simplistic to attempt to describe their duties on the fireline, the equipment they handle, the vehicles they manoeuvre or the might and unpredictability of the flames. Their work is physically and emotionally demanding. Their families always breathe a sigh of relief when they are home safe from a fire.

They do this work with pride, carrying responsibility that would be crushing for the average person. Fire Lookout Observers (FLOs), for example, scan the horizon during fire season, looking for so much as a wisp of smoke which may indicate something is amiss. They have to be able to use a map and a compass to pinpoint the locations of suspected problems so that ground crews can get to them as quickly as possible to launch the first attack. The lookout towers are in remote locations, sometimes

only accessible by foot. Facilities for FLOs are very basic, which makes the sometimes extended periods of time they may have to spend in one place on their critical tasks all the more challenging. The stakes are extraordinarily high.

DELWP personnel include Rappel and Hover Exit Crews who perform their risky and expert roles in remote locations. The crews abseil or rappel down ropes from a hovering helicopter to the ground, often through tree canopies, from a maximum of 100 metres. (Hover Exiting is the transfer of people and equipment from a hovering helicopter to the ground from a maximum of 1.3 metres.)

These workers have to pass the same requirements as firefighters plus the Rappel/Hover Exit Circuit Test every year. Before being considered for one of these roles, the aspirant must have at least one season's experience as a Project Firefighter. These are not jobs for the feint-hearted.

### **They must be recognised**

It is beyond belief that DELWP firefighters are not categorised as emergency service workers. Any and all definitions of emergency services say the same thing. To quote the Oxford Dictionary, emergency services are "public organisations that respond to and deal with emergencies when they occur, especially the ambulance service, the police and the fire brigade".

The question should not be whether DELWP firefighters are emergency service workers, but rather, how they can be described, and rewarded, as anything else.

### **Emergency service interoperability**

In any state government discussion of any aspect of fuel reduction or firefighting there is tacit recognition of DELWP as an emergency service provider. The fact this has not been formalised creates an unnecessary and unhelpful artificial barrier to the concept of interoperability reaching its potential.

Problems with the interoperability of the fire agencies was evidenced on Black Saturday with system failures and duplicated activities identified and investigated by the Royal Commission. Putting the firefighting forces on an equal footing by recognising DELWP as an emergency service would be an important contribution to this concept of shared function and responsibility.

### **Numbers must be reviewed**

Fuel reduction targets have been contentious in Victoria for a long time, but particularly since the Bushfire Royal Commission recommended backburning 5% of public land each year. This is a potentially treacherous process that was the subject of a recent review which recommended changing to a risk-based program. At the time of writing, it was understood the findings of the review by the Inspector-General for Emergency Management were still under consideration by the Environment Minister.

The [Review of performance targets for bushfire fuel management on public land](#) recognises DELWP's expertise and makes a number of recommendations in relation to a risk-based approach, while noting that DELWP currently uses risk-based planning to respond to its hectare-based target. "DELWP's risk-based approach provides a platform for strategic planning and could allow DELWP to

partner with other emergency management agencies and the community to identity the most effective combination of bushfire risk reduction strategies,” the review says.

It is vital that the knowledge of DELWP workers is harnessed to provide a program of fuel reduction that best reduces the risk to workers, to the public estate and the community; and that they are consulted on the number of employees necessary to conduct the program safely.

The AWU and its public sector firefighter members must be included in consultation towards the setting of new targets. There should be no compromise on the safety and integrity of the operations proposed. The failure to hire sufficient numbers of people who are properly trained and resourced to contend with the challenges they will inevitably face could be catastrophic.

In these changing times, there must be a comprehensive approach to identifying the number of people needed to realistically meet targets. PV supports DELWP in all aspects of its fire detection, protection, management and recovery efforts, working co-operatively in high stress circumstances, often with lives at risk. The men and women from both organisations who fight fires, should be heeded.

Decisions on numbers of workers, their training and resourcing, need to be influenced from the ground, by the people who are risking life and limb every day of the fire season. It is impractical and naive to believe that good and effective decision-making can exclude those charged with the responsibility to make those decisions work.

Formal processes of consultation should be put into effect as soon as possible.

## **Shared values, shared knowledge**

It goes without saying that safety is critical in any review of Fire Services. The highly-dangerous nature of this work is beyond question.

Any advance in fire behaviour knowledge is automatically a safety benefit for the AWU’s DELWP members. The more that is known about fire, the greater the ability to manage it, and thereby reduce danger to firefighters. Technology has allowed advances in this research, and continues to do so. This technical and often entirely theoretical knowledge does not replace the value of those who are experienced in the field, each side can learn from the other, and should.

The AWU asks that formal sharing of information across all emergency service agencies should be streamlined and prioritised. This data flow, supported by adequate resources, should contribute to sector-wide training, including Health & Safety Representatives who help develop and maintain safety standards.

The AWU has represented public sector firefighters for generations, and it is the view of this union that a co-ordinated approach to health and safety programs, the collection of data and the commissioning of research can only contribute to the safety of our DELWP and Parks Victoria members