

Union claims Baillieu government about to slash millions from fire services

By ABC Statewide Drive

United Firefighters Union chief Peter Marshall says a leaked document proves the State Government is about to cut \$65 million from the Country Fire Authority and the Metropolitan Fire Brigade, slash training and move bureaucrats into frontline fire command positions. Hear the response from deputy Premier Peter Ryan and download your copy of the document.

Peter Marshall claims his union has been leaked a series of documents from within Treasury that prove the Baillieu Government's plans to make massive cuts to funding for Victoria's country and city based fire-fighting services.

Speaking on the ABC Statewide Drive program with Nicole Chvastek, he says there is also evidence of the Government wanting to tinker with the structure of the fire services themselves.

"There was a Treasury based review of both fire services in February-March this year; a number of significant questions were put to the fire services - in particular, whether fire services require the same number of firefighters during the day as they do at night," he says.

"We've also received information which we know is very good... that the CFA has to find \$41 million of savings... there's a budget cut of \$41 million. Can I say the documentation we have received refers to the cancellation of recruit courses; we know that to be true because that's in the Federal Court as we speak." "We also have received information that the MFB has to find money in relation to budget cuts of about \$25 million," he says.

The document Peter Marshall has supplied to the ABC Statewide Drive program states:

CFA has to find \$41M in year one with further savings required in out years. As a consequence CFA are currently going through a major review of budget which includes a review of headcount, review of any vacancy as it arises with the view of potentially not filling the position/s, reduced training (including recruit courses)...

CFA Regional Directors have been 'directed' to be in uniform within 3 weeks, with a proposal they will hold an operational role (potentially overtaking the Regional Commander role.)... Those existing Regional Directors that do not have an operational background... will apparently be given an accelerated training program so they can be recognised with an operational rank.

(Read the entire document at the bottom of this page)

Peter Marshall declares there is evidence that the State Government has failed to live up to its promise to deliver on the recommendations of the Black Saturday Royal Commission, and that it bodes well with the increase in the number of mega-fires occurring in Victoria.

"As a result of the Royal Commission, there's a finding there that talks about the need for extra firefighters in growth areas of Victoria. An extra 342 firefighters were announced by the Government and agreed to by the CFA - three recruit courses of 30 recruits each year were to be held - the CFA has already cancelled one of those recruit courses... we're also seeing a scaling back of some of the training activity which is a concern.

"What's most disturbing about all of this - this comes on the back of a Royal Commission where we lost 177 lives, devastation of 2,000 homes, communities some of which will never recover, fire services described as best as dysfunctional - we had a government who was then in Opposition who said we will implement every one of those recommendations; what we have here is the smoking gun, that is, there was a Treasury based review earlier this year, which has told fire services to find savings in their budget, not increase their budget."

Government rejects accusation, agrees it will cut funding to CFA and MFB

Peter Ryan, Deputy Premier and Minister for Bushfire Response as well as Police and Emergency Services, rejects Peter Marshall's claims the State Government is cutting CFA and MFB funding outright.

"The frontline service delivery capacity of the CFA and MFB will not be compromised or reduced as a result of budget measures. It simply will not be the case."

However Peter Ryan confirms the document is accurate in detailing the savings both the CFA and MFB are being asked to make.

"There will be reductions for both the CFA and MFB - they will be in the order of the figures that are being talked about, that is so - they will happen out of places such as the CFA's head office in Melbourne, out of the way in which respective programs are run by different agencies... but under no circumstances is there going to be any compromise in any way of our capacity of frontline service delivery of either of these agencies. It will not happen."

Paradoxically, while Peter Ryan agrees some \$40 million will be cut from the CFA, he proudly lists the number of funding initiatives to the CFA over the past year.

He says the cuts to training and funding will not affect the ability of the CFA to deal with bushfires, and

rejects Peter Marshall's criticism that the Baillieu Government is not honouring its commitment to deliver on the recommendations of the Royal Commission into the Black Saturday fires

"Peter Marshall is renowned for this sort of extraordinary commentary, he should read the implementation report of Neil Comrie... who said... there is no doubt Victoria is better prepared now than it ever was in 2009 to meet the threat of fire..."

Peter Ryan rejects Peter Marshall's concerns about a proposal mentioned in this leaked document to replace the requirement for regional commanders to have significant operational experience - thus allowing bureaucrats with minimal experience to take their place.

"...There is just no prospect of either [Mick Bourke or Euan Ferguson] allowing regional Victoria and the CFA at large to be exposed to the sort of commentary that Mr Marshall is referring to. I say again - there is no way we are going to have any compromise in our capacity to be able to deliver the frontline services which are so imperative and which underpin the CFA and MFB..."

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\$66m cuts to firefighting services

Victoria's metropolitan and country firefighting services are facing budget cuts of about \$66 million.

The United Firefighters Union says documents show the Country Fire Authority (CFA) is likely to lose \$41 million and the Metropolitan Fire Brigade (MFB) \$25 million in the first year of the proposed cuts, which are the result of a treasury review.

The union's national secretary Peter Marshall says that is disgraceful.

"This Government should hold its head in shame. You do not cut fire service budgets," he said.

"We've had enough tragedy in this state and we don't want to see any more. Fire services can't sustain budget cuts, there's no fat in the system.

"Fire service cuts will cost lives. It's as simple as that. You can't take away from fire services and continue to ensure the protection of the community."

But the Emergency Services Minister Peter Ryan says front-line firefighting will not be affected.

"The front-line service delivery capacity of the CFA and the MFB will not be compromised or reduced as a result of budget measures," he said.

"There is no way in the world we are going to reduce the front-line capacity of our agencies to be able to compete with the pressures that happen when inevitably we have the fires come again.

"Under no circumstances will we as a Government allow any situation where our front-line service delivery in being able to fight fires is compromised in any way, shape or form, either by the MFB or the CFA."

The MFB's chief executive Nick Easy says the cuts will not affect front-line services in metropolitan areas.

"It is a significant amount, but I'm confident that we are able to maintain our service delivery to the Victorian community," he said.

"There are no reductions in our firefighter ranks or reductions in our ability to meet calls for assistance from the Victorian community."

The union is also concerned about possible recommendations in the Government's emergency management white paper, but the Government says there is no link to the budget cuts.