

Submission to the Fire Services Review

From

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Background

HVP Plantations (HVP) is a forest owner and manager based in Victoria. It is responsible for some 245,000 ha of land spread across the state with a head office in Melbourne and regional offices located in Ballarat, Churchill and Myrtleford.

The land HVP manages comprises approximately 180,000 ha of plantation (pine and eucalypt species) and 51,000 ha of native forest (custodial land.) The plantation land is actively managed as commercial forest, with an annual replanting program of over 5000 ha. The native forest is managed for conservation values. No harvesting activities are undertaken on this land. HVP Plantations carries responsibility for fire prevention and suppression across the whole of its estate.

Forest Industry Brigades

The Country Fire Authority (CFA) Act 1958 enables the Authority to form industry brigades for specific purposes. Forest Industry Brigades (FIB) are established when the aggregate holdings of a plantation company, within a designated area reach a critical threshold. The companies are required to provide and maintain specified levels of equipment, officers and firefighters.

These industry-based fire brigades are operated by the plantation company but are under the operational control of CFA during incidents. Industry brigades are only required to service the companies' plantation assets for wildfire response and fire management planning, however the brigade is empowered to operate outside their designated area, if they consider it in their best interests.

There are some 23 FIB established under this legislation in Victoria, with HVP having seven FIBs covering its estate.

There is a significant cost impost on the forest industry with legislated requirements to supply people, resources and equipment whilst also paying significant contributions to the Fire Services Property Levy. To date, Forest Industry Brigades are the only industry brigades formed under the CFA legislation.

HVP Arrangements

The HVP Brigades are spread across Victoria and reflect the location of the company forest estate and management structure. The following table outlines relevant details:

Brigade	Location	Firefighter Numbers	4x4 Fire Tankers > 3000 litres	4x4 Slip-on Units - 400 litres
HVP Ballarat Plantations FIB	Ballarat	36	2	4
HVP Delatite Plantations FIB	Benalla	20	3	5
HVP Gippsland Plantations FIB	Churchill	95	9	12
HVP Otways Plantations FIB	Beech Forest	4		2
HVP Ovens Plantations FIB	Myrtleford	55	2	4
HVP Rennick Plantations FIB	Mount Gambier	18	2	4
HVP Shelley Plantations FIB	Shelley	15	1	3
	Total	243	19	34

HVP Plantations has taken a risk based approach to fire which results in the company providing far greater resources than is strictly required under the legislation.

The membership of each of these Forest Industry Brigades includes HVP staff and employees as well as HVP engaged contractors. The firefighters are trained to CFA qualification standards and become fully integrated into the incident command system for any event. HVP Plantations owns and maintains a fleet of dedicated fire tankers, smaller slip-on units and command vehicles fitted with CFA compatible radios. The recent upgrade of CFA dispatch communications to P25 digital has come at considerable cost to HVP Plantations, necessitating the replacement of over 180 radio sets.

HVP engages two dedicated fire-fighting helicopters on a short term contracts each season and contracts a fixed wing fire spotting aircraft on a seasonal basis. The company maintains and resources 4 fire towers which are integrated with the Department of Environment, Land, Water and

Planning (DELWP) fire towers. HVP also contracts numerous graders, bull dozers and other plant for fire prevention and suppression activities each year.

On average HVP Plantations Brigades have responded to 53 fires each year. In recent years the greatest number of responses in any one year was 127 in 2012/13 and as few as 21 in 2010/11. Over 65% of the HVP responses are to events on land outside the HVP estate, hence HVP Plantations plays a considerable role in community fire protection.

HVP Brigades get involved in CFA and DELWP fire management burning, especially where the burns are being conducted on land adjacent to the plantations and conduct ecological and fuel management burns on some of HVP's custodial land.

HVP's comments re the Review of the Fire Services

a) Resourcing Requirements for a fire ready Victoria

Forestry Industry Brigades should continue to be enabled under the CFA legislation.

- a. It ensures that FIBs are integrated into the incident management system
- b. It provides same the powers and protections to all CFA members, including FIB members, to take the necessary steps to suppress fires.
- c. Enables FIBs to assist CFA Brigades and DELWP to carry out fire prevention work
- d. Provides compensation for FIB members (and volunteers) who are injured or occur loss when fighting fires off the company's designated land.
- e. Provides a structure that is understood and delivers some certainty to the industry in terms of requirements and expectations that must be met.
- f. Provides a structure that enables training to be undertaken in a systematic manner. By adopting the CFA training standards there is consistency across the state with fire crew training. It also ensures that there is consistency of expectation and delivery across the various forest industry companies when it comes to any mutual aid arrangements that may be utilised from time to time.

Recommendation 1: Forest Industry Brigades continue to be established and enabled under fire services legislation.

CFA actively engages and supports rural communities to ensure that the rural fire brigades are maintained and able to respond when required. This includes:

- a. Increased community engagement activities and education to enhance the fire knowledge and perception of risk.
- b. Having the required number of trained members. Declining rural populations, an aging population and decreased discretionary time for community involvement means that service as a CFA volunteer must be meaningful, efficient and rewarding.
- c. Having the appropriate resources that match the fire risk of the community and locality the Brigade serves. Where Brigades have significant forest or plantation areas within their response boundaries, this may include:
 - Smaller more mobile 4x4 tankers or fast attack / slip-on units
 - Ensuring plant such as bulldozers and excavators are contracted for rapid response on high fire danger days
 - Experienced dangerous tree fallers are available
 - Training brigade members in forest and plantation firefighting.

The forest industry generally and specifically HVP Plantations has always responded in mutual support of its neighbours. Whilst it is a matter of self-interest, to stop a fire entering a commercial plantation if that can be achieved, it is also a matter of being a good neighbour with over 65% of HVP turnouts to fire being on land outside its direct responsibility. It is imperative that arrangements that enable and support this mutual aid continue. Conversely there are also many occasions where local CFA Brigades are the first responders into plantation forests. The legislation and management structures that enable this to happen must continue.

Recommendation 2: The Government needs to develop strategies to ensure the continuation of viable fire brigades in rural and regional areas.

Recommendation 3: Rural Brigades must have access to equipment and training appropriate to the risks they face.

Aircraft are also key resource in tackling many fires. The State needs to ensure there are sufficient helicopters, bombers and intelligence gathering aircraft strategically stationed across the State to ensure rapid fire attack. At times the commitment of aircraft to going operations has left areas of the State vulnerable with virtually no air support. There needs to be further consideration of bringing in additional resources as a back-up for the deployed aircraft.

Recommendation 4: A range of aircraft must be strategically located around the State to assist with fire suppression operations. When these aircraft are committed to operations then back-up / reserve aircraft need to be sourced to ensure full State coverage.

In recent years the emphasis on life protection has led to a tendency to focus on asset protection rather than strategic fire control. Resources must be deployed in effective fire suppression activities not distracted by individual asset protection. The CFA must train and exercise the incident controllers and operations officers to ensure they are taking a strategic view of the fire control options to ensure the fire is brought under control within the shortest timeframe and overall least damage to the whole community.

Recommendation 5: Incident control staff must be trained in developing fire control strategies that ensure the overall fire control strategy brings the fire under control in the shortest time, with the least overall damage.

b) Support of CFA / MFB staff in protecting communities – operational needs / OHS / training

c) Interoperability between CFA and MFB

There may be some justification for the amalgamation of the MFB and the career station staff of the CFA as they are largely dealing with similar events, eg building fires, industrial fires, vehicle accidents, etc. However there is still very much a need for a dedicated rural fire service, specialising in bushfire response as well as building, rural industrial and vehicle accidents. HVP Plantations would not like to see the amalgamation of the CFA and MFB as it may lead to a focus away from the rural emergency response. The CFA also obtains many volunteers from the outer metropolitan areas and so may risk disenfranchising these people if the local CFA focus is removed.

There is a strong need for all fire services in the State to continue to enhance the interoperability of all units to ensure efficient response to emergency incidents.

Recommendation 6: There is a continued need for a dedicated rural fire service with specialist skills in bushfire management. It is important that this organisation also continues to have community connections that encourage volunteers.

d) Interoperability across fire agencies – prevention / suppression – public / private land

HVP has land that abuts both CFA land (country area of Victoria) and DELWP land (protected public land). Since fire respects no boundary it is important that a very high level of interoperability exists between these two agencies. Any means to support and strengthen the existing interoperability must be encouraged so that the management of fire is as effective as possible.

Fire management planning still largely occurs in silos. DELWP have developed a fantastic tool with the Bushfire Risk Landscape projects, however this is only addressing the public land. The Risk Landscape model is not restricted by administrative boundaries but based on logical landscape units within which the risks are somewhat similar. The modelling needs to be applied to both public and private land and strategies developed to implement fuel management activities on a tenure blind basis.

Recommendation 7: Additional work needs to be done to bring the fire management planning system into a tenure blind system. The planning units need to be based on logical fire risk boundaries not artificial administrative boundaries.

Joint Incident Management Teams must be seamless and all resources respond in a unified manner. Resources must be used appropriately and effectively which requires skilled and trained personnel to exert control.

Common training and qualifications should be open to all firefighters in the State. DELWP have developed very rigorous training and development paths for firefighters. There is a similar training and development system for CFA career staff however the development of skills within the CFA volunteers has been somewhat more ad hoc, especially for the more senior roles in the IMTs, eg Sector commanders, Operations Officers, Planning Officers, FBANS, Incident Controllers, etc. There should be one fire training calendar which makes available all fire courses (DELWP & CFA) to all firefighters. Training together also leads to a better understanding of each other and better integration in the field.

Integration of resources from interstate also needs to be considered. Greater effort needs to be placed on ensuring consistent and common training standards across Australia and recognising interstate qualifications. Ensuring interoperability of radio communication systems, establishing cross-border agreements for resource deployments and exercising together are important for fire control in the border areas.

Recommendation 8: Continued development of systems and processes needs to occur to ensure the seamless integration of all firefighting resources in the State. This includes but is not limited to:

- **One IT platform for all fire management activities**
- **One communications platform**
- **Training and exercising as one.**

e) CFA / MFB management structures & work practices

Forest Industry Brigades are often the odd-people-out in the CFA. They do not fit into the traditional mould of CFA volunteer or career brigades. Although a Forest Industry Brigade Manager and Project Officer roles have been identified within the CFA, not all sections of the CFA are aware of the existence of FIBs. The flow of information and consultation with FIBs needs to be improved, especially where changes in practices may have major operational or financial impacts on the FIB. The move by the CFA to Regional Radio Dispatch System involved very little consultation with FIBs, resulted in considerable cost to HVP due to the required replacement of radios and still poses operational difficulties where Industry Brigades have designated areas in more than one CFA District.

Recommendation 9: The CFA needs to develop a greater operational focus on Forest Industry Brigades to ensure their needs are considered by all sections of the CFA before change is implemented.

FIB also require better access to data and fire information systems through the CFA. This would include access to weather forecasting products that allow the timely setting of operational restrictions, standby and operational response levels on a 24 hour basis. Forestry companies are involved in burning operations therefore access to the smoke dispersion models is also important to reduce the impact of smoke on the community. The development of an on-line fire reports system with a database that can be interrogated by brigades would also greatly assist report submission and brigade planning. Access to products such as eMap and FireWeb is also important for FIBs to gain situational awareness and to assess the potential impact of going fires.

Recommendation 10: The CFA need to develop better access for Forest Industry Brigades to vital information to enable the Brigades to function more efficiently.

The dispatch procedures for Forest Industry Brigades via Vicfire are complex and have on occasion resulted in FIBs not being notified of fires within their area of interest. In the ESTA system regular CFA brigade dispatch is automatically generated once an incident is recorded within that Brigade's assignment area. If the assignment area is within a FIB's area of interest then there is a note on that assignment area which tells the ESTA operator to page the FIB for all grass and scrub or undefined fires in that area. At times when ESTA operators have been very busy (eg multiple lightning strikes in January 2014) the operators forget to read the note and so the FIB is not notified.

Recommendation 11: The CFA / ESTA need to develop a better system for alerting Forest Industry Brigades of incidents to ensure that they are notified of all relevant events around their Brigade areas.

f) Workplace culture – respect / cooperation / innovation / diversity

Nil comments

g) Career Firefighters Registration Board

Nil comments

h) Volunteer support

The CFA needs to address the declining numbers of volunteers available for response and longer term deployments. It must make training and exercising efficient, challenging but enjoyable to keep the volunteers interested and engaged. New formats such as self-paced e-learning for some of the theory may need to be developed to allow the maximum opportunities for all firefighters.

Deployments also need to be efficiently organised and well supervised to ensure effective firefighting and to keep CFA members motivated so they will continue to give time to the CFA.

The CFA needs to continue its Peer support and welfare services to support CFA members and their families in response to difficult or potentially traumatic events. These events may be personal in nature or directly related to a member's involvement with a critical incident.

Recommendation 12: CFA need to be proactive in its support of volunteers to ensure the continued viability of this model in keeping the communities of Victoria safe.