

President: Paul du Boulay
Executive Officer: Jodie Neuzerling



PO Box 2417
High Wycombe WA 6057
Email: admin@frsvols.asn.au
Website: www.frsvols.asn.au
Phone: 08 9377 8900
Fax: 08 6278 3456
ABN: 60 328 920 521

4th August 2016

The Honourable Colin Barnett MLA
Premier of Western Australia
1 Parliament Place
WEST PERTH WA 6005

Dear Premier

RE: Response to the Ferguson Inquiry into Waroona/Yarloop

The Western Australian Volunteer Fire and Rescue Services Association (WAVFRSA) is the peak body representing WA's 2,700 Volunteer Fire and Rescue Service (VFRS) members – serving their communities in 100 locations across the State.

The WAVFRSA is extremely frustrated and disappointed in the lack of involvement of FRS members (both Volunteer and Career) in discussions undertaken by the Special Inquirer during the information gathering stage of the inquiry. Additionally, there seems to be a lack of fact-checking of statements made by individuals or organisations quoted throughout the report.

Representatives from the WAVFRSA, Vice President Trevor Jones and Executive Officer Jodie Neuzerling, met with the Special Inquirer on 24th February 2016 to discuss feedback provided by our members on their experiences during the Waroona/Yarloop incident, as well as to assist in clarifying any points the Special Inquirer may have required. It should be noted that VP Jones is a member of Kalgoorlie VFRS and attended the incident as part of the Goldfields Midlands regional taskforce. As far as we can ascertain, he is also the only VFRS member who spoke to the Special Inquirer.

The Ferguson Report should have highlighted there was a significant VFRS representation at this incident. This included the period when the town of Yarloop was devastated. There were 22 VFRS Brigades mobilised to Waroona/Yarloop and other contingencies of VFRS personnel who were also mobilised as part of regional deployment task force teams (Pilbara, Kimberley, Midwest Gascoyne, Goldfields/Midlands, Great Southern and Lower South West regions). Because of this significant contribution, the WAVFRSA believes our members should have been acknowledged for their efforts, with the Special Inquiry also taking a more considered approach to FRS contributions when framing the report.

In all, as many as 350 VFRS members (in addition to at least another 150 CFRS firefighters) were mobilised to assist during the course of the Waroona/Yarloop incident. This is effectively one third of the firefighting force utilised over the period of the fires and yet there is no obvious evidence that the Special Inquirer has engaged with any of those who were on the fireground (other than VP Jones). The WAVFRSA is firmly of the opinion had the Special Inquirer met with some of these individuals or Brigades, he would have received a richer, broader and more balanced view of the

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challenges and the strategies employed to manage this complex and devastating bushfire emergency.

Members of four VFRS Brigades drove directly through the fire front to assist those Yarloop residents who did not evacuate in a timely manner. These members are especially aggrieved and alarmed by statements made in the report and their voice and valuable input has been ignored.

Our members feel that there are numerous misrepresentation of the facts throughout the Ferguson Report, which has been very disheartening. It is difficult enough to wait months for the facts and truth to be released; however, the Ferguson Report perpetuates the myth that VFRS crews were located in Yarloop when it was ravaged by fire. This would imply that the VFRS did not evacuate the remaining residents when they should have and is a smear on our members' professionalism and undervalues the remarkable actions taken during this catastrophic and dangerous period.

We are also concerned with the emotive language used in page 11 of the report's Prologue (Chapter Two); especially '*One hundred and eighty one dwellings were destroyed. Every one of these was someone's home.*' Not even the media got this information so incorrect. There were 181 structures destroyed; however many of these were sheds, outbuildings and the like, as well as commercial properties such as the Yarloop Hotel and the Town Hall. Media reports at the time of the incident all reported that 121 homes were destroyed. It is an exaggeration that is unworthy of a major incident review such as this.

The Special Inquirer makes reference to the BFS as being 'the cornerstone of rural fire management in Western Australia' however, according to statistics, of the 4,485 incidents of landscape fires (this includes bushfires) during the 2015/16 financial year, the majority of these incidents were attended by members of the Fire and Rescue Service (Volunteer, Career or both). The attendance at these incidents is broken down on a service level below:

Bush Fire Service	1,481
Career Fire and Rescue Service	2,388
Volunteer Fire and Emergency Service	254
Volunteer Fire and Rescue Service	1,216

** Note - some incidents will see turnouts of multiple Brigades to the same incident and so the numbers in the table above total more than the number of incidents **

While the Bush Fire Service is certainly an integral part of the firefighting response in Western Australia, they are by no means the only service who attends landscape fires in this State. This statement is supported by the statistical evident provided in the table above, sourced from the DFES Incident Reporting System.

We also believe that the Special Inquirer does not fully understand the operational, cultural and organizational differences between the BFS/FRS in Western Australia and the Rural/Urban fire brigades operating under the CFA banner in Victoria; upon which he heavily bases some of his statements and comments.

The WAVFRSA's formal response to the Ferguson Report is attached to this correspondence, along with our original submission to the Inquiry. However, we wished to bring the above discrepancies directly to your attention. It would be heartening that any future decision on the fire management within Western Australia significantly reflects the views and concerns of the VFRS firefighters. This approach will ensure a more balanced approach and service delivery improvements to this complex subject is not based on the opinions of a single volunteer stakeholder group.

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Given the importance of the recommendations of the Ferguson Review to the members of the Volunteer Fire and Rescue Service; and the impact any decisions to implement these recommendations will have on both our members and our Service, we respectfully request a meeting with you to discuss our concerns and views.

Please do not hesitate to contact me via email admin@frsvols.asn.au, phone 08 9377-8900 or via mobile 0427-800-038 to arrange a meeting time.

Yours sincerely



Jodie Neuzerling
Executive Officer
Western Australian Volunteer Fire and Rescue Services Association (Inc)

CC: Minister for Emergency Services
Fire and Emergency Services Commissioner
Department of the Premier and Cabinet / Waroona Inquiry

Attach: Original WAVFRSA Submission to Ferguson Inquiry
WAVFRSA Response to Ferguson Inquiry

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