

Submission to Waroona Fire Inquiry – March 2016

Forward

The Western Australian Volunteer Fire and Rescue Services Association (WAVFRSA, or 'Association') was formed in April 1898 to provide a single voice on behalf of the State's Volunteer Fire and Rescue Service (VFRS) Brigades and volunteers. The Association currently represents 97 Brigades involving more than 2500 VFRS Volunteers.

To achieve effective representation, the Association has designed and managed a hierarchy that stipulates 2 representatives from each of 7 Zones across the State; meeting at least 4 times per year. Leadership is from an elected President (Paul du Boulay from Northam VFRS), and 2 Vice Presidents. An Executive Officer and Office Administrator are paid employees providing extra representation and support on a number of fronts enabling the Association to provide a broad based grass roots support

The WAVFRSA is recognised in State legislation as the "prescribed Association representing the interests of the members of the Volunteer Fire and Rescue Service" for the purpose of the Volunteer Advisory Committee for VFRS.

Duties of a VFRS Brigade

We also note the versatility of VFRS Brigades that should be considered in any proposed restructure (if any):

- Structural Firefighting
- Grass and Scrub fire suppression
- State-wide fire deployment for major incidents
- Road Crash Rescue
- Well, tank and enclosed space rescue
- Hazardous chemical abatement response
- Public Education (at schools, indigenous communities etc)
- Fire safety, prevention and risk management (including prescribed burning)

They form an integral part of their communities.

Submission

The Association regularly consults its members on a range of issues and this was the case in preparing submissions to the Waroona Fires. The Inquiry was discussed at Executive level for some time during the February Association meeting. There has been frequent email and other communication on many items as well. There is general agreement on what should be raised.

Association representatives also met with Mr Euan Ferguson AFSM on Wednesday, 24th February and we now provide the following submission to the inquiry based on the terms of reference, in addition to comments made at that meeting.

It should be noted that our submission will only deal with points upon which we can make comment with specific examples or where the outcomes of the inquiry can or will affect our members.

Please note the following acronyms will be used throughout this submission:

"VFRS" will be used where an issue relates solely to the Volunteer Fire and Rescue Service

"CFRS" will be used where an issue relates solely to the Career Fire and Rescue Service

"FRS" will be used where an issue relates to the entire Fire and Rescue Service

DPaW Department of Parks and Wildlife

1. *The response to the January 2016 Waroona Fire*

More than 40 VFRS Brigades attended the Waroona/Yarloop incident either as full crews or part of regional task forces; making up a significant portion of the firefighters on the ground. All Brigades were invited to make their concerns via the Association.

(a) The effectiveness of pre-incident bushfire prevention and mitigation activities;

A number of volunteers have commented on their belief that little or no preparation, clearing, preventative measures had been undertaken around dwellings in Yarloop

- No clearing around houses
- Flammable vegetation and rubbish around and against houses
- Piles of leaves in and above gutters
- Very little or no Community understanding of what to do in a bushfire situation and what the capabilities of Emergency Services were.
- No Community understanding of how fast a fire can travel.
- Community seemed to expect to have a knock at the door to tell them when to evacuate and expected a fire truck to protect their home or farm.
- Community did not seem to understand that the 2 days of seeing a lot of smoke indicated a fire threat was at hand or the potential impact of the fuel loading of their surroundings.
- Preventative burns: particularly DPaW – so much preparation and lead in time is required to conduct a preventative burn that by the time the burn-day arrives, often conditions have changed and the burn is cancelled. The planning is usually too little, too late. A more aggressive fuel-load management strategy is required to prevent such large, unmanageable and disastrous fires.
- Fire breaks were inadequate, quite a few breaks had unburnt trees pushed into the burnt area, dozers were also pushing trees over onto bitumen roads blocking access to areas and driving up roads instead of on the side of the road.

In addition, a water point crews were advised would be available at Armstrong Hills Road was not operational and no replacement source was identified.

Most deployed firefighters were reasonably happy with their management, feeding and conditions – their greatest concern was over Community lack of preparedness and awareness of how to look after their own safety as well as their perception of what firefighting forces are capable of doing. They consider a Community Fire Education Program is essential to minimize the impact of such a fire event again.

There appears to be an urgent need to educate local Communities on;

- Changing circumstances now means many Communities can be threatened or destroyed by an out of control fire.
- How to prepare their homes and properties for fire seasons
- What Emergency Services can and cannot do for them
- How to be self-aware of what is going on during a fire and when to self-evacuate
- To promote Bushfire Ready Groups in the region.
- How to make a plan to utilise the entire resources of a Community an effective combined fire attack force. (Pre-planning)

(b) The effectiveness of emergency management plans and procedures;

- Firefighters consider that an immediate or much timelier escalation of firefighting incident management level would have greatly reduced the impact and spread of the fire. Preparations should begin for a Level 3 Fire possible escalation while it is still at Level 2.
- Local Governments need to recognize when to hand-over control to DFES and DFES needs to have better processes in place to identify what will be required once a fire has been handed over.
- DPaW left Yarloop before the fire got to Yarloop abandoning the residents on the oval, they had done a management pre-plan a week or two earlier and didn't follow the plan. During this time they also failed to secure a water source in town, there were a few bores with generators like at the bowls club (required a 2 inch cam lock fitting), potentially could have boosted mains for hydrants in town as there is a set up at Yarloop fire station.

(c) The effectiveness of the suppression strategies and tactics used during the fire;

- There were mixed reports on the effectiveness of CFRS, with some reports indicating that they were not assisting with mop up; whilst others worked well and were willing to operate under a volunteer sector commander
- A vast majority of VFRS Brigades are equipped with an HSR. Whilst this appliance is four wheel drive, it was not designed to be a bushfire fighting appliance as it only carries 1500 litres of water and also has important safety equipment (such as RCR and BA) that should not be subjected to off road conditions. It is an example of a "one size fits all" approach to firefighting appliances instead of ensuring each Brigade/Community has appliances appropriate to where a fire is.
- DFES do not have any bulk water tankers in the FRS system, instead relying on a number of Local Governments that operate tankers (via ESL funding). There are a number of inherent problems with this process (often politically motivated), and water supply contractors are sometimes used to fill in the gaps.
- Automatic Vehicle Locators / Tracking capabilities have been under discussion for a number of years and would be an excellent tool to allow IMTs to be able to task their appliances with far more accuracy than relying on T-Cards. This would also mitigate the issues of T-Cards not being handed in at the appropriate place. When the Waroona incident expanded into Lake Clifton, the IC was under the impression that the area had more firefighting capability on hand than was actually the case.
- DPaW were in charge of the incident, with DPaW trucks left to defend Yarloop (which they had done a pre plan for) with the assistance of one BFS. They failed to set up water supplies or engage in any fire suppression of what was essentially a grass fire as it approached the town with an ember attack. The people in Yarloop were very lucky to have a number of VFRS (and one BFS) Brigade assist with the fire or the remainder of the town would be lost - and a lot more lives.

(d) The effectiveness of incident management, including coordination of agencies, volunteer fire and emergency services and interstate assistance;

- Incident Management teams need to ensure feedback from people on the ground is appropriately considered and utilise local crews who have substantial knowledge of the area as a priority. A number of local crews were not mobilised in the initial stages of the incident, whilst out of district crews were in attendance.
- Newly deployed crews were not expected by ICT and waited around for a number of hours to be deployed on their first day. This pattern continued for many crews on each day of attendance; which was a waste of good resource.
- Incoming NSW, QLD, SA fire management teams were very experienced (especially in their use of technology, fire behaviour analysis (with dedicated analysts) and they got straight into the management team, very efficient and professional.
- There is a lack of knowledge on the operational capabilities of the FRS fleet; which only has a

few off-road capable firefighting appliances. There were a number of incidents during which volunteers received abuse and hostility from the community and BFS members because they were not seen to being proactive.

- Our firefighters noticed on several occasions that a significant number of DPaW trucks were parked up and not being used during firefighting activities
- Briefings provided by crews in the ICV were sometimes inadequate; however this depended on the experience and capability of the individuals concerned. There were issues with the quality and information on maps, including a lack of air intelligence on where the fire fronts and dangerous hot spots were.
- No information was supplied to FRS RUI crews regarding the location and capabilities of residents who stayed to defend. RUI deployments that were completed were not always advised to follow up crews.
- *Operational supplies* - Each control point should have access to both diesel and unleaded fuel and an air compressor (if sectors are in sand). There was a lack of unleaded fuel available for light tankers at some points. Even vehicle cleaning equipment would have been advantageous from a safety point of view.
- *Traffic control* - Traffic was well managed.
- *Distrust of volunteer crews* – a small number of VFRS Brigades have advised this attitude was demonstrated by various agencies and personnel throughout the incident.
- *Fatigue Management* - a number of crews reported this has not been well managed in the past and has re-occurred during this situation. Time on the fire ground was well managed from the Waroona Control Point in the latter stages.

Sector Commanders/Divisional Commanders

- In the initial stages, sector commanders were under resourced. They require a vehicle with an appropriate resource kit (which could include Battle board, list units, comms plan, phone numbers, pencil case, time in, time out, welfare times, clip area for map, fridges and multiple radios).
- Sector commanders regularly didn't have an ops officer or scribe to assist them, this meant they were too busy focussing on the right now answering the radio, rather than gaining vital intel and planning ahead. It would be of great benefit for the assistant to have local knowledge.
- Some sectors were too big. This lead to significant problems with communications and an area outside of span of control. Current radios have a limited range.
- Sector Commanders, Div Comm and F/F were changing at similar times, meaning long delays for those still on the ground. Shift changeovers should be staggered for different roles to ensure appropriate handovers and minimal disruption to those on the ground.
- No plans for incoming crews and incoming sector commanders; lucky to get more than a few scribbles on an a4 black and white map.
- Maps need to be marked up A3 coloured maps, denoting special assets and safety info (ie bridges out), we struggled to get accurate maps with sectors marked on it, there was considerable confusion regarding sector boundaries.
- Incorrect address information was consistently provided and the original meeting point address provided was wrong. For example, one Brigade was tasked with locating a burns victim, and given the wrong street details.
- Lack of foresight and planning, causing most actions to be reactive and limiting the available and effectiveness of resources, particularly on the first 3 days of the fire. Even on the later days of the fire, it was clear most sectors did not have a strategy and plan for how to combat the fire, with many rookie Sector Commanders adding to the complications and causing many resources to lack direction.

Communications

- No answer from sector commanders was common.
- Lack of briefings once in the sector.
- Lack of contact and care from some sector commanders.
- LIVE powerlines laying on the ground and fire affected poles need to be plotted and communicated to crews in the area concerned. This is a safety issue.
- Improvement in radio channel management – there were no communications plans and channels were changed frequently without some user's knowledge.
- No real updates are provided to crews either during a shift or whilst travelling to the incident control point. For example, crews travelling to Waroona from the south who didn't know about the bridge burning out may not have known of alternative routes.
- Breakdown of communication of instructions to crews between the ICV and sector commanders.
- Mobile phones and handheld radios were an issue to charge. The provision of a truck mounted charging station to keep handheld radios fully charged to allow oncoming crews to bring fresh radios and off going crews to return the used ones for charging back at the station.
- Heavy radio traffic (much of it was irrelevant), resulted in jammed communications lines
- DFES need to develop an app for fire ground use that has regular updates for crews with fire maps, known hazards, roads available for crews to use, sectors and comms channels

Catering

The catering provided at Brunswick Junction (by members of the Brunswick VFERS and Brunswick Football Club) was outstanding and the football club also made available their full facilities (including physiotherapists etc) for firefighters' use. However, catering resources at Waroona (particularly in the first 24 hours of a crew's shift) were poor.

Many crews had no idea where it was located; however the catering for subsequent shifts was much improved. A number of crews who were moved from Brunswick to Harvey have also advised of a lack of facilities there – including the provision of only one table with 6 chairs to cover all firefighters requiring food and drinks.

A formal catering process is desperately required to ensure future incidents are better prepared and provided for.

Maintenance / Appliance Breakdowns

- The number of technicians available was limited and they were servicing the whole fire ground - each incident control point should have a mechanic / tech both stationed there and one that can travel out to those sectors to assist with break downs. Trucks should be 100% in working condition as this is an OHS risk not just for the crews but also those working with them.
- A review of vehicle maintenance/repair process/reporting is required to ensure appliances are back on the fireground in as timely a manner as possible.

(e) Protection of essential services infrastructure and access to essential services (power, transport, water, communications) by emergency services organisations and the community;

Local Community were not prepared for loss of power due to the fire or aware that water supply would be compromised. Contingency plans are not being made by Communities prior to a major incident.

(f) The effectiveness of public messaging including the adequacy and timeliness of emergency warnings issued to residents and visitors;

Our members consider it absurd that the Yarloop Community said they were not warned when they could clearly see a great deal of smoke for several days. It is apparent that the Communities did not understand the level of danger and the need for self-management of their safety and evacuation. A great deal of preparedness education is required.

(g) Effectiveness of assistance to and management of those affected by the fire:

(i) Evacuation procedures

External assistance with the door knock in Yarloop Friday morning (Mandurah VFRS were instructed to knock on doors to find people in the morning and have advise that, if it wasn't hard enough already, then having some people yell at you, some break down in tears and others having a blank stare looking suicidal) is difficult to undertake at the end of a firefighting shift. Suggest a process is put in place to ensure appropriate resourcing is made available to tackle this issue.

(ii) Communications with the community over the course of the fire

No comment

(iii) Provision of welfare support

DFES Chaplain attended to Emergency Services Personnel, but some residents said they were unhappy that his services were not available to them.

Whilst we are not supportive of the DFES Chaplain assisting the general public – especially at an incident of this size where a large number of DFES staff and volunteers were already in attendance, it would be of great benefit for a process to be put in place for provision of welfare support services at evacuation centres or a “trauma support service” via telephone.

Crews noted that they were “disturbed” by the frequency of dead or dying animals. There is no knowledge of incident follow-up.

(iv) Management of people seeking to return to their properties, and

No comment

(h) Livestock and companion animal management and welfare issues.

- Some fire crews were distressed to see burned cattle that were not being attended to.
- Not enough was being done to protect stock-feed sheds from fire (this is farmers livelihood) a number of crews helped farmers anyway.)
- Not enough preventative measures in place by farmers around hay sheds – community preparedness & education.
- Some problems caused by absentee landholders or those who had left and stock not managed – some firefighters moved cattle out of fire-path.

2. Lessons learned from previous bushfire emergencies

(a) The extent to which the findings and recommendations of the following Western Australian bushfire reviews undertaken since 2011 have been implemented:

- (i) A Shared Responsibility – Report of the Perth Hills Bushfire February 2011 Review (Keelty, 2011);
- (ii) Appreciating the Risk – Report of the Special Inquiry into the November 2011 Margaret River Bushfire (Keelty, 2012);
- (iii) Post-Incident Analysis of the 2011 Margaret River and Nannup bushfires (Noetic Solutions, 2012);
- (iv) Parkerville Stoneville Mt Helena Bushfire Review (State Emergency Management Committee (SEMC, 2014);
- (v) O’Sullivan and Lower Hotham Bushfires Review (SEMC, 2016); and
- (vi) The Western Australian State Emergency Management Committee Preparedness reports.

- (b) The effectiveness of reforms implemented by the State since 2011 on the State’s ability to prevent, mitigate and respond to major bushfires and the community’s understanding of and preparedness for bushfire risk.

Whilst our Association has seen a number of positive outcomes as a result of previous enquiries, there is still a great deal of work to be done. Improvements include:

- Improved crew protection for firefighting in appliances;
- Enhanced firefighting capability in the South West region of WA (Capes Enhancement Project);
- Improved handover procedures (DFES to DFES), however more work is required for incidents transferring from Local Government to DFES or DPaW to DFES;
- Improvement in incident management due to the pre-formed IMT and increased number of ICV available around the state;
- Inter-agency co-operability at large incidents has been strengthened by the establishment of the State Operations Centre (as well as regional and metropolitan operations points);
- The new training pathways for volunteer firefighters will ensure future members are better trained and more appropriately trained; and
- Improved personal and protective clothing

3. The need for further reform

Any legislative, policy or functional reforms relating to bushfire risk management, emergency management and processes for review of major incidents to strengthen the State's capability to efficiently and effectively manage bushfire-related risk

1. Incident Level Escalation

- Firefighters consider that an immediate or timelier escalation of firefighting forces would have greatly reduced the impact and spread of the fire.
- Provisions that there *might be* an escalation should be started earlier. Many available and willing outside brigades were not deployed until a number of days later. There is the suggestion that a "Level 2.5" (or similar) be introduced to recognise a possible escalation and as a trigger to make contingencies for extra resources.

2. Incident Management

- Increased availability of experienced staff in leadership/management positions at fires.
- Incident Management capability to be increased by exposing key incident managers to more of these situations (eg inter-State, desk top and Community discussion)
- New DO's were put as Divisional Commanders without someone there to mentor them, leaving large gaps in the leadership, this was magnified with a large number of inexperienced sector commanders/task force leaders who also hadn't been trained or experienced. This caused us to be ineffective for long periods of time and some leadership made very poor decisions as they didn't have someone to assist/bounce ideas off. For example when heading too Yarloop initially the task force leader went to a wrong address (in Waroona instead of Yarloop), then travelled down the wrong roads, then headed to a semi-rural area on the northern side of Yarloop, failed to send crews for intel (instead held them doing nothing for long periods of time checking each house one by one), eventually we had to stop him and request him to allow us to check the town (where there is the highest likelihood of people).

3. Legislation

- A legislative requirement for DFES to be in control of all Level 3 incidents that involves property or life. We believe DPaW personnel do not have the appropriate knowledge or training in urban fire, which led to FRS not being called into Yarloop until after the fire hit Yarloop. A similar incident occurred at a recent fire approaching Collie, where a metropolitan Brigade in Mandurah (approximately 90 minutes from Collie) we were put on standby after being advised the fire may hit Collie in 90 minutes; so they were not going to arrive until well after the fire was destroying the town if the containment line failed.
- Legislation that enables the commandeering and deployment of *any* suitable appliances and other necessary resources at Level 3.

4. Resource to Risk

- "Resource to Risk" models prepared by DFES that identifies the firefighting requirements of a particular community do exist, but generally they are not agreed upon as they are not recognising current needs and perceived situations – rather they are based on past history. Without one, it is difficult to ensure communities are appropriately protected and there is limited knowledge on what is available outside the DFES, DPaW and BFS system and what impediments there are in its deployment.
- Expansion within the Volunteer Fire and Rescue Service of bushfire fighting capabilities needs to be seriously reviewed as part of that process given the current resourcing is restricted to a "structural truck" – such as an HSR, a light tanker and in some cases a rescue trailer. It is highly recommended that selected VFRS Brigades are given purpose

bush firefighting appliances that are available, crewed and can be deployed anywhere at little notice.

- There is general understanding that many of the local resources not owned by DFES, privately owned and otherwise were not – event refused – to be used. (eg farm based fire appliances, water trucks etc) Methodologies on how to itemise and be able to deploy such resources should be investigated prior to the fire high season.

5. Command Structure at a Major Incident

- A lack of “command and control” structure within the BFS creates a number of issues on firegrounds in major incidents as they often do their own thing, occasionally do not follow T-Card procedures (meaning incident controllers are not aware they are even on the fireground) and are unwilling to undertake tasks given to them by CFRS staff. There is no formal control over CBFCO’s at incidents.
- This Association believes that the best model for major fire attack is a well-managed and proactive incident control. This situation will most likely be needs to be addressed by changes in Legislation. VFRS Firefighters are well versed in this approach and will accept a command and control incident management.

6. Rural Fire Service

The WAVFRSA acknowledges a push for a Rural Fire Service by several organisations as a solution for the shortfalls in the current operations systems with respect to wildfire.

However this Association has grave reservations concerning the formation of a Rural Fire Service for the following reasons:

- It would result in a duplication of bureaucratic services in human resources and other administrative processes, firefighter training, command, supervision etc – there would be little value for money for taxpayers and the Association cannot see how the extra revenue to achieve this will be raised;
- There are already silos within the current firefighting landscape – such as DFES, DPaw and Local Government (BFS). This would not be improved and in fact would likely be significantly worse.
- The current issue with Local Government CBFCO’s not having to release firefighting resources when requested would be exacerbated by a separate service;
- We do not believe that a RFS would improve the firefighting capabilities or mitigation capabilities for regional communities;
- There will still be the issue of firefighting on the urban-rural interface; namely who is in charge and what resources do they have access to.
- It will create issues within the Career FRS division (eg career path, transfer and promotion) that will negatively impact VFRS.

The WAVFRSA believes there is adequate scope within DFES to strengthen firefighting capabilities in regional areas via expansion of the Country Operations section within the Department; especially if the Head Office is located outside the metropolitan area. Addressing the shortfalls in the current system, including an “enhanced capability” VFRS model will provide a faster and more cost effective overall solution.

It is our preference that there be one operational firefighting organisation in Western Australia – not necessarily one fire service. DPaw firefighting and Bush Fire Service operations should be brought under DFES.

APPENDIX 1

History of the Fire and Rescue Service

The first official fire brigade in Western Australia was established at Fremantle on the 20th October 1885; (Perth had approved a volunteer fire brigade in 1884, but were slow to progress). These brigades were manned by volunteers because then, as now, the Government of the day could not afford to employ people as firefighters throughout the State.

By 1920, there were 24 VFRS Brigades across WA, whilst there were only 5 Career Fire and Rescue Service (CFRS) stations. The largest expansion of FRS Brigades (Volunteer and Career) occurred during the 50's, 60's and 70's when a total of 57 VFRS Brigades were formed, along with a doubling of CFRS to 10 stations.

VFRS members are heavily involved within their communities; usually undertaking fire safety and education work with aged care facilities, child care centres and primary schools. They also often requested to provide general advice in mitigation works such as prescribed burning and bushfire ready plans.

Many of our regional members are also dual-registered members of their local Bush Fire Service (BFS) Brigade and there are a number of co-located Brigades across the State.

