



## MEDIA RELEASE

March 21, 2018

### Reedy Swamp, Bega (Tathra Fire)

The Tathra Fire was a terrible tragedy for all involved. The Volunteer Fire Fighters Association (VFFA) has decided to publish the following 6 points in response to the media generated interest.

#### **1. Firefighters did a good job**

The firefighters did a great job, but they can only do so much on a bad day.

#### **2. Less Fuel equals Less Fire**

A lot of fuel on a bad day is a recipe for disaster. This situation will only get worse if we don't change our approach to land management.

Hazard reduction in NSW deals with approximately 1% of bush fire prone land each year (that's 100 years of work to get the job done). Bush fire scientists (the likes of Phil Cheney) state that we should be treating more like 8% of bush fire prone land annually.

Less fuel will result in lower intensity fires (less fire). Proper land management is vital to protecting the environment, animals, human lives, our property and our way of life. Big fires can destroy everything in their path, but the right fire can prevent the destruction.

#### **3. Remove the Red Tape**

Brigades were once given the freedom to work directly with their local communities to achieve hazard reduction. Without the red tape, the management of hazard reductions was less complicated with greater local interaction.

It is not a big job for over 2000 Brigades to manage their local burns, but it is a massive job for a single entity to do so. The single entity only needs to provide support and assistance to those local Brigades.

The NSWRFs will say that Brigades are part of the process, but the volunteers get frustrated and give up because of the paperwork and numerous hurdles.

#### **4. We need an Independent Audit of Bush Fire Risk Management Plans**

The NSWRFs Commissioner put an end to the Independent Audit and Investigations Unit over 5 years ago. From that point on, Bush Fire Management Committees (BFMCs) were then allowed to conduct their own auditing, a situation that is not acceptable.

The BFMC system is good in principle (if we reach a reasonable quota and quality of hazard reductions) but without an external auditing process, it is not sufficiently robust. We don't seem to be able to accurately determine the quality of a burn, we simply report that a hazard reduction activity has been undertaken.

The results (performance audits) should be reported in the Annual Report of the NSWRFSS. It appears that the NSWRFSS annual reports fail to properly identify the performance of bush fire risk management activities, a requirement under section 62A of the Rural Fires Act. Auditing includes the assessment of risk management activities, post treatment.

## **5. Turf Wars**

With reference to the recent stories and reports of turf wars between the fire services, most areas of concern can be linked back to senior management. We hear about the occasional tussle in the field, but the real issues stem from overzealous senior positions and high-ranking personnel who are building their empire or service capability.

The public does not care about turf as long as their turf gets some attention. Turf wars must be stopped, and it is high time the government realises that you cannot have two Fire Service Commissioners sharing the responsibility for the States complex network of boundaries and agreements.

It is time to appoint an overseeing Fire Service Commissioner that the other two department heads (former Commissioners) report to. A suitable person needs to be sourced externally (not from within the NSWRFSS or FRNSW). This strategy may lead to the development of a single fire service. The government could play it safe, with staged implementation.

## **6. Climate Change**

The VFFA disputes the claim that the Tathra Fire (late in the season) is a result of climate change. History has shown that if we have the fuel, we can have big fires in late March or at any time of the year.

March 1965 (53 years ago) Chatsbury- Bungonia Fire burnt from north of Goulburn to the coast near Jervis Bay 90 km in one day.

March 1965 (53 years ago) Tumut River Fire burnt from the Tumut River to Eucumbene Dam

March 1985 (33 years ago) Bodalla to Potato Point under hot westerly winds.

The only element of bush fire risk management that we can control is the fuel load.

### **Thanks again to the Firefighters**

The VFFA congratulates all firefighters, from all services, for their efforts on such a bad day. It's the system that is letting you all down.

Michael (Mick) Holton

President of the Volunteer Fire Fighters Association

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