



MEDIA RELEASE

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VFFA response to the NSW Upper House Inquiry into Bullying and Harassment in the NSW Emergency Services

The Volunteer Fire Fighters Association (VFFA) President Mick Holton says he is encouraged by the release of the NSW Upper House report, entitled Emergency Services Agencies NSW.

The report focused heavily upon bullying and harassment in the NSW Emergency Services.

"The report confirms what many NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) volunteers have known for a long time - that bullying, harassment and abuse of power is occurring in the RFS" said Mr. Holton.

"The VFFA recognises the courage of RFS volunteers and salaried staff in coming forward and working with the Portfolio Committee No. 4 - Legal Affairs, during this Upper House inquiry."

"Volunteering with the RFS should be non-threatening, respectful, safe and free from all forms of bullying and harassment."

"All volunteers have the right not to be bullied or discriminated against in the RFS" said Mr. Holton.

"We are pleased to continue to lead and to participate in efforts to support volunteers who have suffered bullying and harassment in the RFS and will continue to challenge and call out this unacceptable behaviour," said Mr. Holton.

The VFFA welcomes the release of the report and calls on NSW Government and the RFS to adopt all the recommendations of the Upper House Inquiry into Emergency Service Agencies.

Major Reform is Required

This report, along with recent Bega Valley Fires Independent Review (the Keelty Review), clearly highlights the need for urgent reform.

Some key areas of the report were:

Recommendation 1 - That the NSW Government establish an independent, external complaints management oversight body for workplace bullying, harassment and discrimination.

Recommendation 11 - That the NSW Rural Fire Service implement an independent and impartial process, utilising an external person or organisation, for the election of senior brigade officers.

Recommendation 13 - That the NSW Rural Fire Service review the processes and criteria in place for considering requests for legal assistance by volunteers and staff, to ensure that this support is provided in all appropriate cases.

Recommendation 14 - That the NSW Government and the NSW Rural Fire Service review the undoubted benefits of relocating the NSW Rural Fire Service Headquarters to a regional city, while ensuring that any such relocation prioritises the effectiveness and safe operation of the headquarters.

Excellent Opportunity for NSW Emergency Service Agencies

The VFFA strongly urges the NSW Government to reconsider the relocation of the NSW Rural Fire Service Headquarters to a regional city in a way that links the recommendations of the Bega Valley Fires Independent Review (single, civilianised call and dispatch centre) and recommendation 11.

The VFFA makes the following suggestions for consideration:

1. That the NSW Government establishes an independent, external complaints management oversight body for workplace bullying, harassment and discrimination as a matter of urgency.
2. That the NSW Government expands the relocation of the NSW RFS Learning and Development Section to Dubbo to include the relocation of the entire NSW Rural Fire Service Headquarters also to Dubbo.
 - (a) There are sufficient property resources available in Dubbo.
 - (b) This dovetails nicely with the decentralisation of other emergency service operations including the joint VRA and SES facility at Dubbo airport.
 - (c) This move makes the proposed new NSW Rural Fire Service Headquarters premises available for the development of a single, civilianised call and dispatch centre.
3. That the NSW Government develops the premises located at 4 Murray Rose Avenue at Sydney Olympic Park (was previously set aside for the NSW Rural Fire Service Headquarters, made available after the move to Dubbo).

This development should be focused upon it becoming the State-wide Emergency Services call and dispatch centre.

This development can be made in a way that engages existing call-centre workers from all agencies (no one needs to lose their job).

Civilians can be engaged in the first contact with incoming calls and initiate dispatch.

Agency representatives (existing operators) can be consulted at various levels of incident management from phone calls, radio operations and strategic operational decision making.

4. The NSW Government is then in a good position to develop a single fire service with two key directorates under a single Fire Service Commissioner:
 - (a) Urban and (b) Rural
5. The new NSW Rural Fire Service Headquarters at Dubbo will then become the headquarters for the Rural Directorate.

The VFFA President is happy to expand on any of these recommendations, please contact:

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Please visit the VFFA web site for additional information at volunteerfirefighters.org.au