



Country Fire Service  
Volunteers Association  
(CFSVA)

Submission:

Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities Crisis  
Response

September 2023





**The Country Fire Service  
Volunteers Association**  
*"Representing the interests of CFS Members"*

## **EXECUTIVE STATEMENT**

The Country Fire Service (CFS) is defined by its volunteer focus and support of local communities for which it has gained state-wide and national recognition.

Its unique culture enables CFS to be flexible, progressive, cost effective and highly relevant.

The economic benefit CFS volunteers provide to the South Australian economy exceeds \$200 million per annum, and without the dedication and commitment of these volunteers a state-wide emergency service would not be sustainable nor achievable.

Numerous reviews over the past decade have only served to create negativity and doubt in the minds of CFS volunteers as to their true worth whilst failing to address future sustainability and climate change.

Objectives of this document is to ensure that the view of the CFS volunteer, and indeed other emergency service volunteer responders is considered as part of the Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities Crisis Response. Long term additional support which is critical to the long-term sustainability of CFS and other similar agencies, is necessary to ensure the ever-increasing expectations of the wider community, the impacts of climate change, and other external influence, can all be met, whilst also meeting the often-overlooked needs of emergency service volunteer responders themselves.

It should also be noted that emergency service volunteer responders provide a substantial return on investment for Government, but to emergency service volunteer it is crucial that emergency services agencies are able to support their personnel and maintain a high standard of service delivery, as has come to be expected by the public.

CFS volunteers like their interstate counterparts, epitomise the spirit of their communities and are indeed the backbone of these communities, and it is imperative that to ensure the future sustainability of these agencies that volunteers are acknowledged and supported to secure the longevity of the Country Fire Service and other such agencies.

In this document whilst in the main we refer to CFS volunteers, the same circumstances may be applied to all volunteer emergency services.



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## **Country Fire Service Volunteers Association (CFSVA)**

### **(ABOUT US)**

#### **Overview:**

The Country Fire Service Volunteers Association (CFSVA) was established in 1984 to represent the interest and protect the welfare of Country Fire Service (CFS) volunteer members. It is established in legislation and is a respected stakeholder within the South Australian emergency services, Government, and the South Australian volunteer community.

The SA Fire and Emergency Services Act 2005, recognises the CFSVA as the association that represents the interests of the CFS and as such is empowered to take such steps as may be available to promote and advance the best interests of CFS Volunteers.

All CFS Volunteers are members of the Association by power of this legislation.

The CFSVA is a professional organisation representing 13,500 members and achieves its objectives by presenting the consolidated views of all its members.

The CFSVA has a strong and effective state-wide structure management structure comprising of an elected State President supported by elected delegates representing all CFSVA Branches across the State.

The CFSVA has representation on all Statutory and Advisory Committees relevant to the Country Fire Service including the SAFECOM Board and State Bushfire Co-ordination Committee and operates in consultation with the CFS in the following areas:

- Membership Services
- Operational Services
- Strategic Services
- Community engagement
- Infrastructure

Over the years the CFSVA has delivered impressive achievements including enshrining of the CFS Volunteer Charter into legislation; parity under Return to Work legislation for CFS volunteers; access to presumptive cancer legislation for CFS volunteers; has secured funding for numerous project and initiatives including: a second set of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for all volunteers; and consistently secures consultation for volunteers on all matters that directly impact them.

In recent years the CFSVA has provided considerable support to volunteers on the ground during major fires and has supported and assisted them in their recovery and transition back to their CFS role.

The CFSVA is well respected and enhance the activities of the CFS, by ensuring a good relationship exists with our sector partners, the public, the media, and government, but is not afraid to speak out and take necessary action when challenges to the volunteer ethos are made.

The CFSVA is a founding member of the Council of Australian Volunteer Fire Association (CAVFA) and has provided two past Chairperson to CAVFA.

The role of the CFSVA has over the years changed in line with the changing expectations of its members and their role within CFS, and is proud of its achievements and looks forward to continuing to be an integral part of Australian emergency services into the future.



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## **BACKGROUND**

### **CFS VOLUNTEERS**

CFS volunteers play an integral role in the defence of life and property in South Australia, and over the years the role of CFS volunteers has shifted in line with the changing needs of their local and the wider community. The positive contribution volunteers make to local communities through saving property tallies into the hundreds of million dollars each year, whilst the human element of lives and property saved by CFS volunteers is immeasurable.

The CFS organisation has evolved from several small regional volunteer fire services to an integrated 24/7 professional volunteer fire service comprising 13,500 committed volunteers strategically responding through 428 brigades strategically located across South Australia.

CFS volunteers respond to numerous and diverse incidents including structure fires, road crash rescue, hazardous material incidents, grass and bushfires and provide back up and support to other emergency service agencies including the South Australian Ambulance Service (SAAS), South Australian Metropolitan Fire Service (SAMFS) and South Australian State Emergency Service (SASES).

CFS responses, be it in a truck, managing activities on the fireground or in an incident management capacity which may be either within their own pre-determined response area; their CFS region; or as part of a strike team on intrastate, interstate, or overseas deployments. Peri-urban brigades located close to the Adelaide CBD and regional brigades located close to larger regional areas are frequently dispatched to incidents within populated areas and work shoulder to shoulder with SAMFS paid fire fighters and SASES volunteers.

CFS volunteers deliver emergency services to over 95% of South Australia with statistic clearly identifying the significant role of CFS volunteers within the emergency services sector.

**In 2021-2022 CFS volunteers delivered the following emergency responses:**

**Responded to:**

- 9,500 primary response incident
- 7,114 support service responses

**Total: 16,614 responses**

**Responses included:**

- 32% special services (structure fire / hazmat / storms & flooding)
- 23% vehicle responses (road crash rescue)
- 17% rural fire (bushfires)

**CFS Volunteers Gifted:**

- **1.3 million hours emergency response time to South Australia**

**TOTAL: \$60,606,000** (Volunteering Australia: volunteer dollar rate of \$46.62 per hour)

- It should further be noted that for each hour of response time, there is a minimum of **3 hours of training per volunteer (2,106,000 hours) + additional administration work, meetings etc** which CFS records indicate tallies to an additional **10 million hours / annum.**

**TOTAL: 10,000,000 hours = \$46,620,000**

**TOTAL: \$107,226,000 – CFS Volunteers gift to the South Australian and National economy.**

CFS volunteers generously donate their time, talent, and energy to ensure that South Australians are supported by a professional emergency service, and as such should be afforded solid and unconditional support by government. The personal contribution that volunteers make to the South Australian and National economy, results in the provision of a cost-effective, world-class fire and rescue service to the nation.

Without doubt, volunteers have adapted to the change which has seen the CFS move from principally a locally managed “rural” fire service to a multi-faceted all hazards fire and rescue service underpinned by SOP’s, COSO’s AIIMS, CRIIMSON, AIIRS, and WH&S.

Volunteer pride and goodwill means that CFS volunteers continue to commit, however concerns have been raised that their service is being “taken for granted” or “not valued” as it appears that only at election time or at a time of crisis, that positive funding commitments are made to the CFS, and often this funding commitment is towards resources and equipment whilst the ‘people’ (the volunteers and staff) element of CFS is overlooked.

The community expectation of CFS volunteers has dramatically increased over time, as to has the level of commitment by emergency service volunteer responders and it is imperative that these increased expectations be supported by Government and the key areas impacting on volunteers are addressed, to encourage sustainable volunteer into the future.



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## **DELIVERY OF EMERGENCY SERVICES BY CFS VOLUNTEERS**

CFS Volunteers have over the last decade been respondents to no less than 14 reviews, reforms, analysis, and proposals which have impacted on them as volunteers, and affected the very essence of the volunteering ethos.

These reviews, driven by a variety of agenda, and in some instances with pre-determined and targeted outcomes, have undoubtedly impacted on CFS; its volunteers; its staff and its core business, by creating unwarranted distraction and diverting precious sector funds to purposes other than the delivery of emergency services.

This continual affront on CFS has **not** improved service delivery, **nor** delivered cost saving but has been detrimental to volunteer morale, engagement, and retention.

The clear message from volunteers is that these distractions **must** cease and that CFS must maintain focus on its core business of supporting its volunteers and staff to ensure the efficient delivery of emergency services throughout South Australia.

Points of contention for volunteers include:

- **After every major fire event, Governments have a penchant for calling reviews.**  
*Volunteers have expressed their disdain at reliving harrowing experiences under the guise of a 'review' which then results in the Minister of the day publicly endorsing recommendations emanating from the review but failing to provide appropriate funding to support their implementation, whilst also neglecting to consider the human aspect of the event and potential ongoing impact on emergency service volunteer responders.*
- **Government driven attempts at Reforms / Analysis**  
*Volunteers find it insulting that precious sector funds are diverted to politically driven agendas, whilst, in South Australia, the delivery of the emergency services relies on the benevolence of 13,500 volunteer, 250,000 fire and rescue volunteers Australia wide. CFS volunteers take umbrage at having to 'beg' for the necessary tools to respond and defend South Australian communities, whilst precious funds are flittered away on reviews which seek to cut costs.*

Often there are discussions relating to volunteer engagement, recruitment, and retention, yet the root cause of declining volunteer numbers is often ignored. CFS volunteers clearly indicate that CFS;

its identity and culture, is important to them and that any future proposal must be supported by a comprehensive risk analysis and a meaningful volunteer consultation and engagement process.

The upheaval caused by a barrage of reviews et al. creates great scepticism amongst volunteers and an even more unsettled environment within the emergency services sector. CFS volunteers are clear in that the focus of agencies such as CFS must be solely on its core business which is of supporting its people in the delivery of emergency services, regardless of location.

The fact that over 250,000 fire and rescue volunteers give their time freely to defend Australian communities must be lauded and respected.



## **FEDERAL STRATEGIC PLAN**

The CFSVA strongly endorses a strong, but flexible Federal Strategic Plan and views this as the necessary recovery and progression tool for all states.

The Federal Strategic Plan must outline a collective vision for the future of emergency services and acknowledge its strong dependence on emergency service volunteer responders.

The plan must outline a robust emergency service underpinned by the unique volunteer ethos and adopt a consultative approach to ensure that emergency service volunteers are an integral part of any future journey to implementation.

The level of respect and consideration shown towards emergency service volunteer responders throughout this journey is instrumental to the plan's success.

In South Australia, our CFS volunteers are firm in that CFS' strength is the diversity, talent, skills, and commitment of its 13,500 professional volunteer firefighters, and by embracing the diversity and talent volunteers bring to CFS and recognising and using these skills brings significant advantage, not just within South Australia, but nationally.

Emergency service volunteer responders often indicate their dismay that often, recommendations will impact volunteers or require additional volunteer resources, however, seldom is consideration given to the additional burden on volunteers or drive by Government for volunteers to achieve outcomes on limited or no budget. Financial investment by government is essential to ensure skill enhancement and support services for volunteers.



As public expectations increase, and as we encounter more severe fire season, it imperative that the foundations for a modern and efficient emergency services is laid now. It is imperative that these foundations instil confidence and provides reassurance to Australian that they will be protected, defended, and supported at the most critical and challenging times.

At a recent forum hosted by the CFSVA, CFS volunteers identified the following as critical components to sustaining CFS into the future.

**CFS must:**

- Remain volunteer centric; by ensuring a strong volunteer focus within the organisation.
- Flexible; by recognising that “one size” does not fit all.
- Have sound operating principles for recruitment, training, resources, infrastructure, and retention of volunteers.
- Seek diverse sourcing option to secure volunteers (reserve brigades/strike teams)
- Encourage youth participation, inclusion, and diversity
- Be sufficiently funded, staffed, and resourced to support volunteers in the delivery of emergency services.
- Define agreed core activities for volunteers in fire and emergency response
- Provide for skill development for volunteers
- Recognise and use the skills that volunteers bring with them
- Be flexible and encourage people with a range of skills to manage emergencies.
- Require minimal administrative functions by volunteers
- Allow CFS managers to manage, but also be strong operationally.
- Adopt best business management practices, including succession planning and mentoring.

Key areas such as: volunteer engagement, youth engagement, community engagement, diversity, inclusion, retention, and recruitment are the key to a maintaining a strong and effective volunteer fire service into the future, and any future strategy must be all encompassing and inclusive.

**Identified challenges to CFS into the future:**

- Increase in public expectation and demands.
- Budget constraints
- Declining population in regional areas
- Politicising CFS
- External pressures creating unrest / dissatisfaction amongst volunteers
- COVID 19 – ongoing effect
- Climate Change
- Declining volunteer numbers / participation - Worldwide trend.

The CFSVA as a founding member of the Council of Australian Volunteer Fire Association, is of the opinion that whilst the forum was undertaken with CFS volunteers, the same risk and challenges applied to all emergency service volunteer response agencies.

## **Futurism:**

Futurism and future planning are critical to all emergency service volunteer agencies, particularly given the severity and ferocity of recent and forecast weather events, together with the on-going ramifications of the COVID pandemic and the impact of climate change.

Often, discussions relating to volunteer engagement, recruitment, and retention, fail to address the true cause of declining volunteer numbers which are often ignored. Our CFS volunteers clearly indicate that CFS, and its identity and culture, is important to them, and any Government proposal which undermines the volunteer ethos would be very poorly received. Meaningful volunteer engagement and consultation is necessary to ensure the success of any future proposals.

Mentoring programs and succession planning are also identified as critical component to retain long term interest and engagement.



## **ADF INVOLVEMENT – SUMMER 2019-2020**

The CFSVA has nothing but praise for the integral role the ADF played in the South Australian bushfires on Kangaroo Island and the Adelaide Hills.

The CFSVA was on the ground to witness first-hand the support and camaraderie demonstrated by ADF personnel. Their training, experience and humbleness provided most welcome and comforting support at a desperate time.

The feedback from our volunteer emergency responders whilst again offering nothing but praise for ADF personnel suggests that whilst the ADF support was invaluable, there was an initial expectation that the ADF would also provide operational support on the fireground.

The announcement made by the Prime Minister of the day, gave our firefighters the impression that the ADF personnel would provide some welcome operational relief to our exhausted firefighters. Once on the ground it was soon identified that ADF personnel were assigned to provide support services only, with the management of the incident itself remaining in the hands of CFS.

Any future Commonwealth Capability support should also consider operational support, as once an events become a critical event, operational resources may soon be depleted and until the incident it contained, recovery is hampered.



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## **CFSVA PROPOSAL**

### **READY RESERVE BRIGADES (SURGE CAPACITY) (CFS used as example)**

The CFSVA has identified several issues within the external environment which are highly likely to impact the future of volunteering with the CFS.

Issues such as an ageing population; rural decline and consolidation of farms; and other industries such as mining attracting people away all greatly impact on future sustainability.

These factors place increasing pressure to maintain and increase volunteer numbers, and in some areas, it is becoming harder to retain trained volunteers with some brigades experiencing difficulties in recruiting, particularly for daytime crewing.

Conversely, whilst volunteer numbers in some rural areas are in decline, some outer metropolitan brigades (peri-urban) have lengthy waiting lists of volunteers seeking to join.

It is critical to capitalise on these areas where there is increased interest and provide a mechanism through which members of the public can become emergency service volunteers. The CFSVA views currently as a lost opportunity.

The CFSVA has considered the notion of forming "Reserve Brigades", however due to several constraints to date this idea has received limited support. Undisputedly, over 75% (1.3 million) of South Australia's population is located within the Adelaide metropolitan area which makes this a huge target area for CFS recruiting for reserve brigades.

Rural youths also enter the CFS as cadets, progress through training and become competent fire fighter, often find that they have no option but to resign from CFS when they move to Adelaide to either further their education or secure employment. Attempts by them to join a peri-urban brigade are often unsuccessful as brigades are at capacity, and like many others are added to a waiting list.

Considering the financial cost of training volunteers, it is difficult to comprehend why there is no capacity to retain trained volunteers who relocate to Adelaide, and at the same time to make provision for metropolitan dweller who have expressed a desire to serve as a CFS volunteer.

More and more frequently, there is a need for larger contingents of volunteers to form "strike teams" for emergencies outside of their own local areas. These "strike teams" are becoming harder to fill, however by establishing a "surge capacity" through Reserve Brigades to deal with large or ongoing incidents it will alleviate the pressure currently being placed on CFS volunteers and staff.

Reserve Brigades may be attached to existing peri urban brigades with extended membership specifically targeting bushfire response volunteers, or new brigades set up within an urban environment specifically to respond to major on-going incidents.

Funding would be required to enable the establishment of Reserves Brigades



## SUMMARY

The altruistic nature of emergency service volunteering creates a unique culture which enables flexibility, progressiveness, and cost efficiencies for Governments, but is also vulnerable with an increasing number of volunteers feeling that their service to the nation is being taken for granted and indeed exploited.

The economic benefit emergency service volunteers provide to Australian economy runs into the billions of dollars each year, and without the dedication and commitment of these volunteers a national professional emergency service would not be sustainable nor achievable.

Emergency service volunteers are the face of the community and viewed are by the media and the public as 'heroes' a term which volunteers do not comfortably accept. Volunteers view themselves as good citizens; citizens who at times of need step up to support and defend their neighbours, their community, and broader communities.

Emergency service volunteers bring with them a plethora of talent, expertise and skills which must be harnessed and not dismissed as "just volunteers".

Budgetary constraints and the constant pressure to do more with less; the persistent assault over the last decade on the volunteer ethos; and unfunded promises by government, are all taking their toll on volunteers, with volunteers reaching the point where they are unable or not prepared to give more than they already give.

For many years the focus of Government funding has been on "what looks good to the public" rather than what is good for the nation and has meant that the 'people' aspect of volunteer emergency services is often forgotten.

The notion of forming Reserve Brigades is sound and has its place within modern Australian society. It supports a shift in traditional volunteering whereby as a reserve firefighter, you may contribute more during critical incidents, but be less involved at other times, however it must not conflict or be viewed as a substitute for traditional emergency volunteer services, but it must complement and enhance current emergency volunteer services.

Further, emergency volunteers would take great umbrage at funds being diverted to support an additional cohort of volunteers when current volunteers are not being adequately funded nor supported by government.

The CFSVA appreciates the ability to respond the Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response Discussion Paper – August 2023 and would welcome further discussion or feedback.

Sonia St Alban  
Executive Director

