



Yarra Valley Group of Fire Brigades



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2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission
Chairperson
Honourable Bernard Teague AO
GPO Box 4358
MELBOURNE VIC 3001

19 November 2009

Dear Chairperson,

RE: Expression of Support for Chief Officer - Country Fire Authority

The Victorian environment and population is no stranger to bushfires, or the losses caused by fire. The 2009 Black Saturday Fires, like so many before them, will be indelibly imprinted on the psyche of all involved. There is no doubt that this natural disaster has had a profound effect on all Australians. This 2009 Royal Commission is inquiring into the single largest Victorian disaster in terms of deaths, injuries, homes and properties lost. Like every inquiry, report or review of a significant bushfire event, from 1939 (Black Friday), to 1983 (Ash Wednesday), this Royal Commission will examine lessons to be learnt and organisational structures and systems that can be further improved.

Community expectations of government and its emergency services have clearly changed and there is a higher expectation of the quality of fire services delivered to the community. It is easy to look at emergencies with the benefit of hindsight, and identify areas that could have been managed better, or where one may question decisions or judgments made.

When so many people lose their lives in a wildfire event such as was experienced on that extreme day, many people understandably want to apportion blame. This is disappointing. All fire service personnel keenly feel the loss of lives. It is important to remember that there were multiple agencies involved in coordinating response efforts for this emergency – to single out one agency or leader, above all others is inequitable.

We feel that our organisation and leaders have been judged on one single day of fire – 7 February 2009. That was one day in what was a protracted 21 day campaign. The true strength of CFA's capabilities and leadership was demonstrated in their ability to deliver fire protection and suppression activities to multiple communities, while simultaneously commencing recovery work.

On behalf of all eleven Yarra Valley Group of Fire Brigades we write to express our support for CFA Chief Officer Russell Rees. As the public face of our organisation he has been subject to intense scrutiny by this Royal Commission and criticism by both media and community, in particular of his leadership and delegation of duties as Chief Officer; knowledge and control of multiple fires; and response of resources across the entire state.

Some of this criticism reflects the intense emotions surrounding the personal costs and loss of this fire event. Others appear to have unrealistic expectations. No one single person could have commanded each individual fire – to expect otherwise presents a simplistic view of the complex issues of fire management planning and suppression.

We support our Chief for the strength of leadership he demonstrated during the course of February 2009 Fires and as he continues to lead the fire service into the coming summer. We trust that the Chief Officer draws strength from the fact that his people, volunteers and staff alike, have not called for his removal and have openly supported the interim reforms.

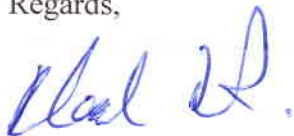
Any critical analysis of agency preparedness, response issues and resources must include a balanced 'setting of the scene' of events. The events of this fire were unlike that ever faced before: the weather events of that day were unprecedented; the message had been responsibly and publicly advertised in the preceding days and that wildfire survival requires planning, preparation and practice and an appreciation of the risks involved.

It is imperative that the 2009 Royal Commission provide a balanced, analytical and constructive investigation of the Black Saturday Fires. In focussing on opportunities for improvement, often only losses are examined and 'saves' or good practices can be easily overlooked. Any recommendations should also honestly reflect that bushfires have and will always continue to be present in Australia. The reality is that people and property will continue to face the impacts of this natural occurrence. No fire service, nor Government, nor Royal Commission will be able to provide 100% protection from a wildfire. This fact should be openly acknowledged, otherwise people will have a false sense of security or unrealistic expectation of protection.

All fire agencies and the State's fire policies and practices have been built on learning's from past events. The recommendations from this event will provide a new benchmark for prevention, preparation, response and recovery by all fire agencies and support agencies. We support recommendations which strengthen and improve our fire management capability.

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing emergency services, the government and 2009 Royal Commission, is that in the past, community interest and impetus has waned rapidly; to prevent the short term memory loss, we must not let this opportunity slip or we may again quickly forget our fire risk.

Regards,



Region 13
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Roly Rak