

---

## More on Strike Team Management

Thanks to those who have responded for my call for better management of Strike Teams in CFA. In this piece, I reflect some of the advice and suggestions for better management of Strike Teams.

Strike Teams are an effective method to organise individual resources. Volunteers and other CFA members invest significant time and effort to partake in Strike Teams. They must be managed safely, effectively and efficiently. In the last 5 to 10 years there have been instances where there has been insufficient work, slow deployment and an inability to re-deploy Strike Teams.

The first point to make is that many readers agree that we must manage Strike Teams better. Many people are involved in the command and management of Strike Teams: Rostered Duty Officers at State and District; Regional and Incident Controllers; Strike Team Leaders and Staging Area Managers are all part of the “sending”, “receiving”, tasking and caring for Strike Teams. The local CFA Group, or local DEPI / Parks Victoria staff are also crucial for provision of local knowledge. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of the Incident Controller to ensure that Strike Teams are managed and tasked in a safe and effective manner.

Little of this advice is new. Rather, it seems we are failing to pay attention to the lessons of the past. There is a crucial need to recognise and value, time, effort, professionalism and commitment by all CFA members who participate in Strike Teams.

A number of people reinforced the need to pre-plan. We need to ensure all firefighting vehicles (especially those in Strike Teams) are self-sufficient for food and water for the first 8 hours. This reduces the need to stock up at a Staging Area en route. It was questioned whether we need to introduce more substantial ration packs (more than just snack and lolly packs).

If requesting a Strike Team, clearly identify the task. Requestors need to ensure that the supply of tankers does not exceed the work available.

Many respondents agreed that there are often significant “bottle-necks” at Staging Areas.

Incoming Strike Teams should be brought through Staging Areas quickly and efficiently. We should strive to “turn through” Strike Teams as fast as possible. This may include collection of “T-Cards” at a location more directly en route to the fireground. (This is particularly so if travelling to the Staging Area would result in excess or an impractical driving route to the fire).

Briefings are extremely important to incoming crews and Strike Teams. However, there was a view that, in pursuit of developing a formal SMEACS briefing, we wait too long for a printed briefing document. We need to become more adept at providing fast SMEACS briefings that are written into a log book and delivered verbally (to crew leaders who write the key points into their field notebooks, then develop their own SMEACS briefing for their crews).

An excellent suggestion was that CFA and DEPI need to consider better use of smart technology (such as tablet devices) to issue basic SMEACS briefings and maps to crews as they are en route to an area of operations.

---

*“We are volunteers of necessity. We want to protect our own properties and protect the people in our community. All we want is to be allowed to have a go, to have a crack at it.”*

*– CFA Group Officer*



Staging Areas are vital to register, brief, feed, water, clean and rest Strike Teams. Staging Areas are also a means of fixing damaged or lost gear. There was a general consensus that these things are essential – but after a shift of hard work.

Each Strike Team Leader should be paired with a local guide (CFA or DEPI) to provide local knowledge. The home CFA “Group” are well positioned to provide local knowledge to incoming crews. Sector and Division Commanders must be empowered to manage, task and re-task and if necessary re-deploy Strike Teams if they are not being used properly. This needs to occur through the line of control. Fireground Commanders need to constantly weigh up the relative benefits of specific asset protection versus deployment of Strike Teams to suppress the fire perimeter. Fire control is essentially a perimeter exercise. Minimising the damage to assets is about prioritising fire extinguishment within the burnt area. It must be acknowledged that, unless crews are deployed to the fire perimeter, the fire will continue to get bigger and threaten more communities and burn more assets.

Universal feedback was that members volunteer for Strike Teams in the recognition that they will be working, and working hard. Sector Commanders need to find work and re-deploy Strike Teams if necessary. Where the fire has burned through an area, Strike Teams may need to find work that may not necessarily be obvious to them. An example, offered by a Ground Observer Crew after the Aberfeldy fire burned through Seaton, was to help landholders mop up fence lines, break up burning firewood heaps, and generally help the affected landholders for the first 24 hours after the fire impact. It may be necessary to stop and ask landholders what it is that they would like done most.

We are firefighters. We are expected to put out fires. But in the immediate aftermath of a fire (or any other emergency for that matter) our role is to provide hope and to do good things in the community affected by the emergency. This means we may need to be guided by the specific needs of individual property owners until more organised relief can get under way.

The final comment was about leadership. There is a significant onus on Sector Commanders and Strike Team Leaders to ensure that the tasking of and welfare of Strike Teams is managed actively. It is also the responsibility of Crew Leaders and crew members to seek out meaningful work.

There is a sequence to tactics used on the fireground: First priority is to perimeter suppression and protection of assets; once the perimeter is secured: identify, assess, secure dangerous trees; consolidate perimeter control lines; mop up in depth and patrol. Much of this work requires working off the truck, using hand lines and hand tools.

Leaders should not hesitate to ask and suggest if they feel that the job can be done more safely, effectively and efficiently. Managing risk is a continuing task for all of us, it is possible to be too risk averse. We must strive for a practical balance between risk, reward and consequence. We must ensure that we focus on putting the fire out, in order to achieve our mission.

Thank you for listening and wherever possible translating these comments into action.