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CFA divided on reforms

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COUNTRY Fire Authority (CFA) volunteers around the district agree that firefighting agency reform in Victoria will not affect local brigades' capacity or staffing in the short term.

However, there are differing views about the effect the changes might have in the longer term, with volunteer firefighters association Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria (VFBV) voicing serious criticism of the processes underway.

A new Victorian firefighting regime came into effect at the start of this month after government legislation to enable it passed in state parliament in June last year.

The legislation created a new all-professional agency, Fire Rescue Victoria (FRV), which merges 1400 career firefighters from Melbourne's former Metropolitan Fire Brigade (MFB) and the CFA.

The CFA, now without paid firefighters, has been transformed into a volunteer-only organisation, which will continue operating its 1220 brigades made up of around 50,000 volunteers.

The CFA's 38 professional and "integrated" stations - which professional brigades formerly shared with volunteers - will now be run by Fire Rescue Victoria.

The restructure has seen paid staff at the Kerang headquarters of District 20 - the large CFA area that Gannawarra is part of - switched over to being technically employed by the new organisation, FRV, and "seconded" back to work for the CFA.

However, with no integrated stations in District 20, many local firefighters don't feel the changes affect them.

Macorna CFA captain Daniel Crichton said he wasn't concerned about the restructure.

"My opinion with the whole thing is basically it's business as usual," he said.

"At the end of the day if the pager goes off, we'll still respond, we'll still be there to help."

Cpt Crichton said the Macorna brigade was adequately resourced to serve the community and he believed most members of it were too busy running their farms or businesses to get involved with the politics of the situation.

However, several VFBV members and other CFA volunteers told the *Gannawarra Times* they have concerns with the reforms.

VFBV District 20 president and state councillor Greg Murphy said there had been a lack of genuine consultation with volunteers about the reform process and that promises had been broken.

"We have what they call a vol-



Captain Darren Jenkins (front centre) with his Leitchville CFA brigade last year. Picture supplied.

unteer charter, which is part of the act and which sits with government, and they're not following that charter which says they need to consult with volunteers and tell us what's going on and what changes are happening.

"We don't know whether there will be more changes that affect volunteers long term but we're letting people know that the government has promised some things and they've reneged on them already," he said.

Mr Murphy said the association has three main concerns: FRV uniforms; changes to firefighting area boundaries; and potential impacts on volunteer brigade budgets.

The VFBV objects to District 20 staff being required to wear the FRV rather than CFA uniform, despite what it claims was an earlier undertaking by the government to the contrary.

Mr Murphy also pointed to the number of CFA and other organisational leaders who have left or lost their jobs over the course of the government's reform process as evidence of serious problems with it.

A long-running bitter industrial dispute involving the United Firefighters' Union and the CFA dates back more than four years and has claimed a long list of leaders, including the former Minister for Emergency Services, Jane Garrett, and the full board of the CFA.

In recent weeks there have been another two resignations.

CFA CEO Steve Warrington quit last month, and CFA board chairman Greg Smith stepped down just last week.

Inglewood CFA captain Andrew

Smith agreed that the losses indicated a problem.

"Clearly something's not right because there's too many people resigning," he said.

"We've probably all got concerns about it but I think we're not far enough into it to know what's going on," he said.

"There are all these different stories going around, but how it's going to end up we don't know."

Former VFBV District 20 state councillor and Cohuna second lieutenant Rob Waterson said it would probably be another one to three years before the issue "sorts itself out".

Mr Waterson said he thinks CFA volunteers are likely to be left worse off as the influence of the professional, unionised organisation increases.

"Eventually, down the track, brigades like ours will probably miss out on funding, because VFS will get first cut of the cake," he said.

One VFBV member, who didn't want to be named, described the reform process as "a con job" and "a load of bullshit".

"The CFA's going to get screwed over big time," he said.

"Everything's controlled by the union."

The reform, which has been implemented by the Victorian Labor government, has now become highly politicised, with the state opposition vowing to pass legislation to "rebuild and restore" the CFA within its first 100 days if elected in 2022.

The government recently pledged \$126 million to the volunteer firefighting organisation for training, protective equipment, station funding, fleet re-

placement and mental first aid.

Around the region plenty of local CFA members share Macorna captain Daniel Crichton's view that there is no real issue in northern Victoria - among them Leitchville captain Darren Jenkins.

"I don't think we've got any concerns. We've got no paid people with us at Leitchville so it doesn't really affect us," Cpt Jenkins said, also disputing the claim that rural brigades aren't getting enough information.

"There have been plenty of emails - from district 20 and also the blokes down in Melbourne at head office," he said.

"They keep us well informed."

At District 20 headquarters, commander Luke Waterson - like all the firefighters the *Gannawarra Times* spoke to - emphasised that CFA services are not in jeopardy.

"The take home message for our communities is that operationally nothing will change," he said.

"When you call triple zero a fire truck, if required, will attend today, just like it did last week, and like it will next week and the week after that."

"Whether I'm wearing an FRV, CFA or even an MFB uniform it doesn't really matter."

"My role as a catchment commander is to maintain and support CFA volunteers, and that won't change if I'm employed by FRV or any other government organisation."

"That's my job and that's what I plan to do."

CFA management has officially welcomed Fire Rescue Victoria as its new partner in delivering fire and emergency services.



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