



**National Bushfire CRC  
Enhancing Volunteer Recruitment and Retention  
Project (D3)**

**Report Number 1:2004  
Recruitment and Retention of Volunteers:  
Rural Fire Services' Issues and Initiatives**

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## Executive Summary

- There is little hard evidence of an imminent general crisis in volunteer numbers for Australia's rural fire services (but see the next two points).
- Changing demographic and economic circumstances may represent some degree of threat to volunteer firefighter numbers in the future, with increased competition likely for a diminished pool of fit adult volunteers of working age.
- A majority of fire services report currently experiencing difficulties in maintaining adequate numbers of volunteers in some localities: mostly (a) remote rural communities with static, or declining, and ageing populations, and (b) new housing developments on urban/rural fringes where a sense of "community" is weak.
- A majority of fire services report some concern about the potential impact of recent organisational changes (notably greater formalisation of training and reporting requirements) on the commitment of older, long-serving volunteers, especially in rural areas.
- A majority of fire services report concerns that changes in work patterns and economic circumstances may increase the extent to which employers are reluctant to release staff who are volunteer firefighters to attend incidents, especially for protracted periods of time responding to "campaign fires".
- A majority of fire services report under-representation of: (a) women in operational roles, and (b) volunteers from a non Anglo-Australian cultural background.
- Most fire services report crewing difficulties with some urban/rural interface brigades during business hours Monday-Friday.
- Most fire services have introduced, or are in the process of introducing, initiatives to address issues related to recruitment and retention of volunteers. While all the initiatives described address important issues, perhaps with one exception, they mostly address single issues, rather than representing attempts by agencies to deal comprehensively with short and longer term issues relating to volunteer recruitment and volunteer retention.

## Recommendations

The following are suggestions for each rural fire service to consider, having regard to their particular situation and circumstances:

1. Establish a Volunteer Development Working Group (or equivalent.). The function of the working group should be to identify and address issues for the agency associated with volunteer recruitment and retention, rather than being concerned with day-to-day issues of volunteer training,

administration and support. The working group should: (a) involve at least one staff member who occupies a high level position in the agency; (b) comprise members from a range of roles involving regular contact with volunteers; and, (c) be adequately resourced to carry out research and policy/procedures development (as distinct from routine administration and support).

2. Undertake an audit of how effectively the agency is implementing the generally accepted three key elements of “valuing” volunteers in order to retain them: (a) soliciting and listening to their views and suggestions; (b) providing opportunities for meaningful personal and professional development; and, (c) recognising publicly volunteers’ contributions—such recognition being within both the organisation and the wider community.
3. Devote more resources to (a) establishing, or reviewing, benchmarks for minimum and maximum desirable member levels for brigades, having regard for the kinds of risks a brigade is likely to face in meeting the needs of its community; and (b) monitoring effective volunteer numbers in relation to likely demands.
4. Improve the quality and usefulness of the agency’s volunteer data base for strategic planning purposes.

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## Overview

Rural fire services throughout Australia are heavily dependent on volunteers to respond to fires and related emergency incidents. Maintaining adequate numbers of volunteer firefighters is thus essential to the protection of people, property and the environment in areas vulnerable to bushfires. Australian rural fire services are very aware of their dependence on volunteers. This Report is based on information provided by fire service personnel. It (a) summarises the present situation of volunteer firefighter numbers in Australia; (b) describes potential longer-term threats to volunteer firefighter numbers; (c) discusses important current issues affecting volunteer recruitment and retention as identified by fire services; (d) describes initiatives introduced recently, or being planned, by fire services to address issues involving volunteer recruitment and retention; and, (e) offers some observations about aspects of volunteer recruitment and retention which have emerged during the process of gathering information from fire services for the Report.

## Background to the Report

This Report is based upon:

- Interviews and discussions with rural fire services staff in human resources and volunteer management and support roles.
- Discussions and email contacts with a small number of volunteer firefighters and with career firefighters involved in training and supervising volunteers.
- A briefing and discussion meeting with Chief Officers of rural fire services.
- Reviewing reports and other documents produced by fire services concerning volunteer recruitment and retention.

The main purpose of the Report is to bring together in a single document: (a) a summary of the most important issues associated with recruiting and retaining volunteers as these are presently understood within the various fire services, and (b) a summary of the ways in which fire services are presently responding to these issues with new initiatives.

It is expected that the document will serve as a “base-line” for the future in order to evaluate contributions from the Bushfire CRC Volunteerism (D3) Project to enhancing recruitment and retention of volunteers by fire services.

It is hoped that the document will contribute to discussion within and across fire services about how best to anticipate and respond to the changing social, demographic, and economic contexts within which volunteers must be recruited and retained.

A subsequent report will review previous research studies relating to aspects of volunteer firefighter recruitment and retention and discuss possible implications of this research.

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## Volunteer Numbers in Australian Rural Fire Services

The most up to date figures available (May/June 2004) for the total numbers of active rural fire service volunteers (not including Juniors/Cadets) are as follows (see Bushfire CRC Volunteerism Project Report Number 3: 2004 *A National Profile of Australian Rural Fire Services Volunteers*):

ACT ESB	450 <sup>a</sup>
CFA (Vic)	58,643 <sup>b</sup>
NSW RFS	51,378 <sup>b c</sup> (67,000 <sup>f</sup> )
NT F&R	200 <sup>d</sup>
QLD F & RS (RFS)	48,398 <sup>e</sup>
SA CFS	14,820 <sup>b</sup>
TSF	3,990 <sup>b</sup>
WA FESA	26,546 <sup>b</sup>
TOTAL	<u>204,425</u> (220,047 <sup>g</sup> )

<sup>a</sup> source: the *Age*, 26/06/2004, *My Career*, p. 1

<sup>b</sup> source: the agency concerned

<sup>c</sup> the agency advised that the figure is unreliable

<sup>d</sup> N. Brooks, personal communication, November 2003

<sup>e</sup> extracted by M. Walshe from an Excel data base on a CD ROM provided by B. Trembarth, QLD F & RS

<sup>f</sup> agency estimate: Martin Surrey, personal communication 29 June 2004

<sup>g</sup> using the NSW RFS estimated figure

(Note that the Northern Territory Fire and Rescue Service is not a participant in the Bushfire CRC Volunteerism Project because of its small volunteer numbers and it is not discussed further in this Report).

There are indications that, for some agencies, volunteer numbers have declined somewhat in the last five years. However, the “decline” may be more apparent than real. Greater formalisation of record

keeping of volunteers' training has probably served to reduce overall "book numbers" without necessarily reflecting a dramatic drop in effective volunteer numbers.

In the course of my visits to fire services and discussions with staff an interesting pattern of comment was noted. In each instance, staff involved in volunteer management and support described a situation in which, on the one hand, there was concern expressed frequently by operations staff about volunteer numbers generally. On the other hand, attempts to quantify shortfalls in volunteer numbers indicated that either there was no evidence of a general problem and/or that while there may be some brigades where crewing levels presented a problem this was most likely to be so in only a few locations. These locations tended to be of two kinds. First, remote rural areas where the host community had a static, or declining, and ageing population, due to changing patterns of work in rural regions and consequent shifts in population numbers. Second, new housing developments on capital city and large regional centre urban/rural fringes, where a sense of community was weak, with low levels of the kinds of "social capital" that leads to community volunteering generally.

Most agencies reported that there were some locations, mostly on urban/rural fringes, where it was sometimes difficult to have adequate numbers of volunteers available to respond during weekday business hours.

Finally, I received several anecdotal accounts about some urban/rural interface brigades experiencing high annual turnout rates, especially during weekday business hours, with a heavy workload falling on a relatively small number of volunteers who were deemed to be at risk of "burning out" and leaving the organisation.

In summary, the overall situation for rural fire services seems to be that: (a) there is no immediate crisis in overall volunteer numbers; (b) but there are some brigades in almost all states where brigade viability is at risk, primarily because of economic and social change factors affecting their host communities; and, (c) there are probably brigades in urban/rural interface locations where the workload is high for the number of volunteers effectively available on weekdays.

The above imply a need for fire services generally to devote more resources to: (a) establishing, or reviewing, benchmarks for minimum and maximum desirable member levels for brigades, having regard to the kinds of risks a brigade is likely to face in meeting the needs of its community; and (b) monitoring brigade effective volunteer numbers in relation to likely demands across the week.

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## Potential Long-Term Threats to Volunteer Firefighter Numbers

In the preceding Section, I concluded that, based on the information currently available within rural fire services (incomplete and imperfect though that may be, nationally), there seemed little indication of an imminent crisis in volunteer numbers.

However, there is every indication of longer-term threats to volunteer numbers, probably likely to begin having some impact within the next five years (this time frame can only be a “guesstimate”). Based on ABS census data and other demographic research available to fire services, there is general agreement concerning the evident demographic trends: an ageing population, and a diminished pool of fit adults of employment age. This is almost certainly likely to lead to greater competition among volunteer-hosting organisations (both government instrumentalities like fire services and the military, and traditional Third Sector or Non-Government Organisations) for volunteers from this shrinking stratum of the community.

In addition, there seems to be a degree of consensus among social researchers and commentators that present trends evident in the world of work will continue: decreasing job permanency and increasing job insecurity; more short-term contract employment; greater casualisation of the workforce; more self-employment, a proliferation of small niche-type employers with few employees and “thin” margins; and declining protection of workers by unions. In such a job environment it is quite possible that emergency services volunteering will prove to be difficult for many potential volunteers to undertake, regardless of their motivation to do so.

Finally, there is some evidence (suggestive rather than definitive) from some community Third Sector/NGO sources) that “tomorrow’s volunteer” may be more discriminating, less altruistic, and more motivated by self-serving considerations in choosing when, where, and how to volunteer than has traditionally been the case. The suggestions are that traditional ‘community service’ motivations may be diluted to some degree by a more hard-headed approach to volunteering which looks to opportunities for professional development and career enhancement. Further indications from the same Third Sector/NGO sources suggest that “tomorrow’s volunteers” are also more likely to look for volunteering opportunities which are well-structured, time-limited, and flexible: they will seek short-term project-type volunteering opportunities. These latter predictions, if proved true, will present serious challenges to rural fire services, whose cultural and operational traditions will conflict with such a pattern of volunteering motivations.

Several implications follow from the above.

1. Most fire services probably need improved data on the characteristics of their current volunteer workforce: age profiles, length of service profiles, role within their brigade (at the very least operational or support), level of work-related education and training, employment status, and employment industry sector. This topic is the subject of Bushfire CRC Report Number 2:2004 *Rural Fire Services’ Volunteer Data Collection and Management*. It is raised here to highlight the fact that long-term strategic planning concerning volunteer recruitment, training, and retention requires good quality data and a powerful and flexible centralised data analysis system. Without such, effective planning to respond effectively to emerging ‘futures’ is difficult, if not impossible.



2. The kinds of roles available for volunteers in fire services need to be examined and reviewed. There needs to be greater role differentiation than is currently the case in most agencies so as to enable prospective volunteers to have a better appreciation of the kinds of opportunities for personal and professional development available to them. At present, most fire services simply differentiate between operational and support roles. In the future it may be necessary to go beyond this in order to allow better matching of the needs and interests of tomorrow's potential volunteer with what is required by brigades.
3. There will probably have to be greater attention paid to identifying and marketing the personal and career-related advantages flowing from being a volunteer firefighter. Most rural fire service recruitment advertising tends to emphasise community service. It will probably be necessary to give greater emphasis in future to what benefits the volunteer firefighter gains. Recent TV marketing advertisements for the Army Reserve are probably good examples of such an approach. (Of course, to succeed in the long-term the claimed benefits will actually have to be delivered to the volunteers!).

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## **Summary of Significant Issues In Volunteer Recruitment and Retention Identified by Fire Services**

All except one fire service described difficulties with maintaining brigade numbers in some remote rural locations. The causes of the difficulties are reasonably well understood. These are economic and demographic. Agricultural production is far less labour-intensive than in the past. Populations in smaller rural centres have declined. With fewer employment opportunities, young people move to the capital cities or major regional centres. There are limited options for fire services. Some small non-viable brigades can be closed and resources re-directed to adjoining brigades. Existing brigades can perhaps be given greater support to minimise administrative workloads and more actively recruit new members. Non-traditional sources of volunteers may be available: greater involvement of women in operational roles, volunteers from cultural backgrounds other than Anglo-Australian.

Most fire services identified difficulties in maintaining brigade numbers in some new housing developments on urban/rural fringes around capital cities and/or major regional centres. The difficulties seemed to be related to the newness of the development. There was a lack of a sense of community and low levels of the “social capital” (network links etc.) that fosters community volunteering generally. Again, options for fire services are limited but would mostly centre on community education initiatives, with support from adjoining well-established brigades.

For both of the above issues (small rural communities, new urban/rural fringe housing developments) the recruitment models currently being used by CFA (“targeted recruitment”); and SA CFA (“The Recruitment Project”) appear to hold great promise and other agencies should consider following their example. Both the CFA and SA CFS models involve providing (a) advertising and promotional resources for use at state, regional and local community levels; and (b) supplementary administrative support to brigades during the recruitment campaign. The process leaves responsibility for recruitment in local brigade hands but provides the wherewithal for brigades to be more focussed and effective in their recruitment endeavours (see pages 20 and 25).

All fire services raised concerns about the willingness of employers to allow employees who were volunteer firefighters to absent themselves in order to turn out to incidents. Particular concerns were raised about long-term absences to attend campaign fires. As indicated earlier, the concerns arise from changes in the nature of work within Australian society. Fire services obviously need to invest more in fostering good working relations with employers of their volunteers—providing employers with more information, assisting volunteers to negotiate agreements with their employers, marketing emergency services volunteering to employers as ways for businesses to be good corporate citizens, and providing tangible forms of recognition to employers of volunteers. At this point in time, only CFA and TSF have reported planning any action aimed at fostering better relations with employers of volunteers.

All fire services raised concerns about the pressures that volunteering may be placing on families of volunteers. Again, particular concerns were raised about the impact on families of volunteers’ absences interstate fighting campaign fires. There seems a need for agencies to find out more about (a) the impacts of volunteering on families; and, (b) ways in which families might be better supported and their contributions recognised.

All services except one noted that women were under-represented in volunteer ranks generally, and particularly in operational (as distinct from support) roles. Some concerns were raised that there may be attitudes among older male volunteers, especially in rural brigades, hostile to women taking part in firefighting activity—more information is needed.

Most services noted that there had been considerable organisational change over recent years, much of it driven by concerns over O H & S issues, and governance issues. The result has been an increased formalisation in training and reporting. Concerns were expressed about the possibility of these changes impacting negatively on the commitment of some volunteers to remaining with the organisation, particularly older, long serving volunteers in rural areas. Closely linked with this, the issue of training was mentioned by all agencies. Training for volunteers appears to evoke controversy. On the one hand, there are fears that increased formalisation and a mandated requirement to meet National minimum standards will lead to a reduction in numbers among older long-serving volunteers. On the other hand, it is expected that a more formal approach to training will be an incentive for volunteers to join and remain. Both views may, of course, be correct—more information is needed. QLD F & RS is planning a survey of volunteers' knowledge of, and attitudes towards, more stringent safety-related training standards. Other agencies may wish to consider following their example.

Most services noted that while they had no data on the number of volunteers from cultural backgrounds other than traditional Anglo-Australian, anecdotal evidence was that volunteers from other cultural backgrounds were under-represented—more information is needed.

Most fire services noted that Junior/Cadet volunteer programs were quite successful as a recruiting vehicle in the relatively few brigades which offered such programs. However, there was uncertainty about how it may be possible to expand the number and scope of these programs.---Perhaps agencies should consider reviewing their existing Juniors/Cadets program in order to set new directions and allocate resources accordingly.

(Note that brief summaries of the main points raised during initial discussions with agencies are provided at Appendix A).

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## Current Initiatives Described by Fire Services

The descriptions of initiatives provided by the fire services are at Appendix A. A summary of these follows.

- ACT ESA: Centralised initial volunteer recruit training program  
Minimum physical fitness standards for volunteers, annual assessment
- CFA VIC: “Does the hat fit?” targeted recruitment program  
Member Benefits discount scheme  
‘Closer links with employers of volunteers’ initiative
- NSW RFS: Volunteer exit survey questionnaire  
Upgrade of brochures and web site  
Cooperative research venture “V21—Enhancing Volunteers for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”, with NSW Benevolent Society, St Vincent De Paul Society, and the Australian Catholic University
- QLD F&RS: Survey of volunteer knowledge and attitudes toward changed formal training requirements  
Review of brigade function in areas of urban expansion into bushfire-prone areas
- SA CFS: “The Recruitment Program” operating at State, regional, and brigade levels  
“The Leadership Program” to develop leadership and management skills
- TAS FS “The Volunteer Recruitment Project” and Volunteers Handbook  
‘Closer links with employers’ initiative.
- WA FESA Proposed “Volunteer Research and Strategic Services” unit.

The initiatives address a range of immediate concerns related to both recruitment and retention issues. However, there appears to be some need for greater integration of agency initiatives to increase the likelihood of substantial overall advances being made in addressing recruitment and retention issues. The task of ensuring adequate volunteer numbers in an uncertain future is complex and many recruitment and retention factors are likely to be interrelated. Introducing initiatives in an isolated fashion carries some risks, no matter how worthy a particular initiative may be. The main risk is that immediate short term problems are more likely to be addressed, with longer-term strategic issues in danger of being put to one side.

Further, isolated initiatives are more likely to be left to individuals to carry out who already have high workloads associated with ongoing day-to-day responsibilities for “routine” matters of volunteer training, administration, and support. Under such circumstances, initiatives are at risk of falling victim to delay, and partial, rather than full, implementation.

Given the importance of the volunteer role to the functioning of rural fire services it is recommended that each agency consider allocating resources to establish a Volunteer Development Working Group (or equivalent). On the basis of the information available, it appears that FESA WA is currently considering such an initiative. The function of such a working group as proposed would be to identify and address emerging issues associated with volunteer recruitment and retention, rather than being concerned with day-to-day issues of volunteer training, administration and support. In order to be effective, such a unit would need several things. First, it would need to involve a very senior staff member who occupies a position of considerable authority in the agency. Second, it would need as members staff from a range of roles which involve regular contact with volunteers. Finally, it would need to be resourced with staff able to carry out research, develop policies and procedures, and evaluate the effectiveness of volunteer recruitment and retention programs and initiatives. It seems unlikely that an organisational unit with responsibility for strategic planning and policy development in relation to volunteer numbers and characteristics would be able to be effective if it did not meet these three criteria.

There is further discussion related to the above topic in the General Observations section following.

FESA WA has concluded that retaining its volunteers is a “cornerstone” of assured viability of brigade numbers (M. Horbury, email communication, 25 June, 2004). It is interesting that, at present, NSW RFS is the only agency which asks volunteers who leave the organisation to complete an exit survey questionnaire as a matter of routine in order to track reasons why volunteers leave. This procedure has enabled some potentially damaging administrative and supervisory difficulties to be resolved speedily (M. Surrey, personal communication, 3 June, 2004). SA CFS is planning to carry out a program of volunteer exit interviews by telephone shortly (A. Palmer, personal communication, 24 June, 2004). CFA is presently considering a draft exit survey questionnaire (email communication, D. Parkin, 29 June, 2004). The use of exit interviews and surveys to gain information on why volunteers leave their organisation was the subject of Bushfire CRC Volunteerism Project (D3) Occasional Report Number 1: 2004, *Exit Interviews and Surveys for Volunteers*. Copies of the report are available from [m.bertoldi@latrobe.edu.au](mailto:m.bertoldi@latrobe.edu.au) . A copy is available on the Bushfire CRC internal web site at [www.bushfirecrc.com](http://www.bushfirecrc.com) .

By way of concluding this section, it is probably appropriate to refer to an important ‘watershed’ event, the National Summit for emergency services volunteer leaders and managers, held in Canberra 11-12 October, 2001. The Summit Report (Emergency Management Australia, 2002) was titled *Value Your Volunteers or Lose Them*. The volunteering literature indicates that meaningful valuing of volunteers so as to retain them involves three organisation practices in particular: (a) soliciting and listening to their opinions, views, and suggestions; (b) providing relevant opportunities for their personal and professional development; and, (c) publicly recognising their contributions.

- I noted that there were no initiatives reported to me concerned with enhancing two-way communication between agencies and their volunteers.
- Only SA CFS described to me a comprehensive scheme for volunteer personal and professional development (“The Leadership Program”, p. 25).
- I again commend to agencies the desirability of reviewing their service and recognition award schemes so as to ensure that these are appropriate for the volunteer firefighter world of the 21<sup>st</sup>

Century---this was discussed in Bushfire CRC Volunteerism Project (D3) Occasional Report Number 2: 2004, *Recognition and Service Awards for Volunteer Firefighters: A Comparison Across Fire Services*. Copies are available from [m.bertoldi@latrobe.edu.au](mailto:m.bertoldi@latrobe.edu.au). A copy is available on the Bushfire CRC internal web site at [www.bushfire.crc.com](http://www.bushfire.crc.com). This Occasional Report stimulated considerable feedback and discussion. A follow-up report summarising this discussion will be distributed in July 2004.

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## General Observations

This Report is primarily a reflection of, and commentary on, issues described by staff in rural fire services agencies concerning volunteer recruitment and retention, and responses to these. However, I formed some general impressions from my ‘outsider’ perspective during the process which may, perhaps, be worth considering.

The first of these is that organisational units charged with the responsibility of volunteer support and administration appear to be (mostly) to some degree under-resourced (both in human terms and in organisational influence terms). They tend to be (though not, of course, universally) somewhat submerged in a wider “human resources” organisational function and have to ‘compete’ with the need to address issues of both career operational staff and career corporate staff.

The second is that this under-resourcing means that the attention of staff in volunteer administration and support units tends to be almost totally consumed with (i) day-to-day routine tasks, and (ii) “crisis” response tasks. There is (mostly) little opportunity for them to: (a) identify longer-term, systemic issues likely to impact on volunteer numbers; (b) prioritise these; (c) develop new initiatives, policies, and procedures; and, perhaps most important of all, (d) “sell” these to senior management staff sufficiently highly placed in the organisation to be able to influence outcomes in the highest decision making forums in the organisation.

Related to this second point, there seemed to a perception among some (obviously not all!) involved with volunteer support and administration that operational capital equipment issues—“brightly coloured trucks” was one phrase I recall--tended to be given somewhat higher priority than human capital (volunteers) issues.

Finally, I received some interesting, quite unexpected, input of unknown reliability suggesting that at least some volunteers may have views of what constitutes important issues for volunteer retention somewhat different from those raised in the course of my ‘official’ discussions with agency staff. Earlier in the year, I was interviewed by Melbourne *Age* journalist Carolyn Rance (who writes regularly on educational and employment issues). The interview concerned the two La Trobe University Bushfire CRC projects (Firefighter Safety and Volunteerism)—Mary Omodei (Project D2.3, Safety, Project Leader) was also interviewed subsequently (neither of us was shown the article before it appeared in print). It ran as an ‘op ed’ piece in the *Age My Career* section on Saturday 15 May 2004. A copy of the article is at Appendix B. This article was, apparently, noted by many CFA volunteer firefighters. I received several phone calls and email contacts from volunteers (all of whom were very positive about the article!) who wanted to give me information and ask questions. In the course of responding to each I took advantage of the phone contacts to ask: “If you could make just ONE change in how things were for you volunteers, what would that be?” Most callers replied with some variant of: ‘change things so that volunteers are not out of pocket by responding to calls, especially those who are self-employed or employed on a casual basis’. Of the remainder, most replied with some variant of: ‘make the public more aware of what volunteers do on a day-to-day basis, not just what happens when there are big campaign fires’.

Presumably there is considerable diversity of opinion among volunteers about what would, or would not, contribute positively to volunteer recruitment and retention. This implies a need for agencies to ensure that there are means by which volunteers can inform agency management of these opinions. Volunteer associations are obviously one vehicle for this. However, given that the strength of a rural fire service is its volunteers, new approaches to facilitating two-way communication between agency and volunteers need to be devised and trialled regularly.



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## Acknowledgements

Thanks to the following for providing detailed information on fire services' volunteer recruitment and retention issues and initiatives.

ACT ESA: Roberta Liddell; Peter Dunn  
CFA VIC: Charles King, Mike O'Mara, Neil Bibby  
NSW RFS: Martin Surrey, Phil Koperberg  
QLD F & RS: Judy Newton, Bernie Trembarth, Reg Reichel, Dave Luxton, Lee Johnson  
SA CFS: Adaire Palmer, Euan Ferguson  
TAS FS: Robyn Pearce, Gerald Kutzner, John Gledhill  
WA FESA: Glenda Husk, Murray Horbury

-----The author is solely responsible for the views expressed in the Report.

Mary Bertoldi, La Trobe Bushfire CRC Projects Administration Officer, assisted in preparing the Report.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Major Volunteer Recruitment/Retention Issues identified by Each Fire Service, and Their Current Initiatives: Visit/Discussion Summaries of the Main Points Raised Initially**

#### **ACT Emergency Services Authority**

The ACT Bushfire Service has approximately 450 volunteer firefighters (the *Melbourne Age*, 26/06/04, *My Career*, p. 1) in 9 brigades, six of which could be described as “urban/rural interface”, and three “rural”.

#### ***Issues***

There are no serious issues with volunteer firefighter recruitment at this point in time. Fire activity in NSW and the ACT in recent years has resulted in the role of the volunteer firefighter being given a high media profile, accordingly it has not been necessary to undertake any recruitment advertising campaigns.

In relation to volunteer retention, the annual attrition rate of approximately 10% is perhaps at the “high end” relative to rates reported by other rural fire services. This is most likely a result of a highly mobile workforce, many of whom move interstate or overseas in connection with being Commonwealth Government employees.

In common with all other fire services, *prima facie*, women volunteers are under-represented relative to the general population. This perhaps warrants being investigated further, on equity/diversity grounds. However, as indicated previously this apparent under-representation of women is not related to any shortages in volunteer numbers at this time.

Some concern was raised about volunteering perhaps putting some strain on families but there was no solid information available about this as a possible issue.

It was noted that the impact of new, more formal, training requirements seemed mixed: there were concerns that these might reduce commitment to remaining with the organisation, but there were indications that other volunteers appeared to welcome the changes.

It was noted that there had been considerable organisational change recently it was not known what effects the implementation of new structures, policies and procedures would have on future recruitment and retention.

It was noted that only one brigade had a Junior volunteer program.

#### ***Initiatives.***

The ACT Bushfire Service is small compared to other fire services and administration of the volunteer workforce is quite centralised. This has permitted two innovative programs to be instituted.

The first is a centralised induction training program for all new volunteers. Under this scheme, initial training is provided by Headquarters Brigade, not by the brigade which the volunteer will subsequently join. The impetus for the program came as a result of some complaints from Brigades that time was wasted on providing initial training at local Brigade level to new recruits who subsequently dropped out during, or shortly after, training. This was seen as being a waste of time and resources for local Brigade personnel. The new centralised initial training program relieves local brigades of the burden of providing initial training. It is also hoped that the centralised program may reduce early drop-out by introducing new members to the larger organisation (ACT Bushfire Service), not simply to a single local brigade. The expectation is that such a procedure develops a new volunteer's "big picture" appreciation of the role and scope of the volunteer bushfire service resulting in higher levels of commitment.

The second initiative is the introduction of a "Fitness for Duty Standards" policy. This policy sets out fitness standards for each of four specified Fitness Requirements (arduous, moderate, light, and none) linked to firefighter function classifications (general bushfire fighting, remote area bushfire fighting, fire tower operator, etc). The policy requires Operational volunteers to demonstrate their level of physical fitness every 12 months in order to maintain their Operational status. One outcome of the policy is that the number of Operational volunteers throughout the service is known with reasonable certainty for human resources strategic planning purposes.

## **CFA (Victoria)**

There are approximately 58,000 volunteer firefighters in 1,240 brigades (*About CFA* [www.cfa.vic.gov.au/about/index.htm](http://www.cfa.vic.gov.au/about/index.htm).)

### ***Issues***

While the number of CFA volunteers appears to have been declining more or less steadily over the last five years there is no evidence of a “crisis” in volunteer numbers. It may be that the apparent decline is at least partly due to more accurate record-keeping in connection with greater formalisation of training requirements. However, there are at least four issues of particular concern.

The first is future viability of some brigades in remote rural areas of the State with declining or static community population numbers.

A second is new housing developments on the urban fringe where volunteering rates of all kind may be low due to the newness of the community and consequent low levels of “social capital” in the form of social networks and a lack of social cohesiveness.

A third is high annual turnout rates of some brigades on the urban fringe and a risk of high workloads falling upon a small number of members of the brigades affected.

A fourth concern involves present and anticipated future difficulties for some volunteers in being able to take time from their paid employment to attend emergency incidents.

In addition, it was noted that families of volunteers may be under pressure, particularly when volunteers were absent for long periods interstate and fighting campaign fires.

It was observed that the last 5 years had been a time of great organisational change. It was not known how this had impacted on the commitment of older, long-serving volunteers, especially in rural areas

It was acknowledged that volunteers from non Anglo-Australian backgrounds were probably under-represented among the volunteer workforce, but no data were available.

### ***Initiatives***

In a large organisation like CFA many issues are identified as worthy of attention. At this point in time three innovative programs are of particular note: targeted recruitment, the Member Benefits plan, and assisting employers of volunteers.

Targeted Recruitment: The recent “Does the hat fit?” campaign arose from an identified need for some aspects of CFA “culture” to change: more women in operational roles, greater representation of volunteers from non-Anglo Australian backgrounds. The program utilised a 30-second video promotion: (a) emphasising varied roles within CFA (additional to traditional firefighting); and (b) featuring men and women volunteers, blue- and white-collar volunteers,

and volunteers from both Anglo-Australian and non-Anglo-Australian backgrounds. This was supplemented by material for use at the local brigade level: “shell” brochures for over-printing with local information, advertising posters, and CFA baseball caps as a visible identifier to promote a community identity. The program was trialed in the West of the State, with administrative support input from an adjoining region. The campaign involved interviews on local radio, articles in local newspapers, cards mailed to residents, and town meetings. The emphasis was on joining now, being trained quickly, and rapidly becoming involved in operations once basic training was completed. The trial campaign was evidently very successful.

Member Benefits plan: Under this scheme volunteers can obtain a Member Benefits card which entitles them to discounts and special deals with companies and organisations providing a very wide range of services and products. At present there are approximately 11,000 CFA card holders. SES Victoria members can also participate in the scheme and there are presently 1,800 SES card holders. At present the scheme operates on State basis. In future, it may be possible to extend the scheme to involve businesses on a more localised basis.

Assisting employers of volunteers: Changes in the pattern of employment (privatisation of former State/Federal/Local government enterprises, greater casualisation, more self-employed, “leaner” business arrangements, etc) have created some general difficulties for volunteers being available to attend incidents. In similar vein, the “campaign” fires of recent years (NSW, Northeast Victoria) presented many employers of volunteers with particular difficulties as staff sought extended time to take part in these operations. CFA is proposing to examine the needs of employers and what kinds of information would be helpful in assisting them to develop policies for their employees who are emergency services volunteers.

## **NSW Rural Fire Service**

There are approximately 67,000 volunteers in 2099 Brigades. (NSW RFS: [www.bushfire.nsw.gov.au/index.cfm](http://www.bushfire.nsw.gov.au/index.cfm) )

### ***Issues***

NSW RFS came into being organisationally in 1997. As a “centralised” rural firefighting agency, it replaced what was a largely municipal service (the NSW Bush Fire Brigades). One aspect of this recent history of change is that data base records on the volunteer firefighter force are reliable only for the years after 2001. The NSW RFS has the largest volunteer firefighting force in Australia. Four major volunteer recruitment/retention issues have been identified.

The first concerns mostly brigades in the rural areas of the State. There are difficulties in maintaining brigade numbers due to declining and ageing local populations associated with economic and demographic change.

Second, a pattern has been observed with many volunteers joining aged 18-19 years and leaving in their early 20's for work, study, or family commitment reasons. It is hoped that many of these will re-join later in life, perhaps in their late 30's/early 40's, assuming their initial experience of serving as a volunteer was positive.

Some concerns have been expressed that recent organisational change involving greater formalisation of training and operational activities may impact negatively on the commitment of some older, long-serving volunteers in rural areas.

Finally, there are concerns that some employers may be reluctant to release employees who are emergency services volunteers—particularly for long periods of time associated with campaign fires.

It was noted that families of volunteers warranted greater attention than they had hitherto received—how to recognise their contribution?

It was noted that little was known about how people from different cultural backgrounds perceived the RFS and volunteer firefighters.

### ***Initiatives***

NSW RFS was the first (and so far, only) rural fire service in Australia to implement an exit survey questionnaire procedure for volunteers leaving the organisation.

New advertising brochures are in preparation, and the NSW RFS web information will soon be reviewed and revised, including the provision of information about volunteers and volunteering to assist employers of volunteer firefighters.

The RFS has joined with the NSW Benevolent Society, St Vincent De Paul Society, and the Australian catholic university in a cooperative research project: “V21—Enhancing Volunteers

for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”. Focus groups have been conducted examining aspects of volunteers’ experiences in the three volunteer-hosting organisations.

## **Queensland Fire and Rescue Service**

There are approximately 45,000 volunteers in 1,584 Rural Fire Brigades (as at January, 2004, *Volunteer Statistics, Rural Fire Service*).

### ***Issues***

The distances involved and the size of the area served present considerable logistical and communication difficulties in supporting volunteers. Two major issues associated with volunteer recruitment and retention have been identified.

The first involves what might be called “traditional” rural fire brigades in the more remote rural areas (mostly in the State’s West). The population in surrounding communities is static or declining and average ages of volunteers are increasing.

The second issues involves what might be called “newer” brigades: Gold Coast to Brisbane Valley, Ipswich area, North Coast, for example. In these brigades, there is no lack of volunteers but the volunteers lack operational experience of fire behaviour, in part because only small-scale prescribed burning takes place.

In addition, there are indications that some newer housing developments have not yet evolved into cohesive communities and their volunteer brigades may not be well integrated into the community and there is a lack of community appreciation of fire risk.

There is some concern that increased formalisation in training and operational procedures may impact negatively on the commitment of some older, longer-serving volunteers to remain with the organisation.

### ***Innovations***

Queensland Fire and Rescue Service is currently planning a survey of volunteer knowledge of and attitudes towards formal training requirements associated with national minimum standards of training requirements driven by OH & S and related legal concerns.

QFRS Rural Fire Service has identified the need to devise strategies that would facilitate the retention of rural fire brigades in areas of rapid urban expansion in areas of significant bushfire risk. The principal requirement is to develop a funding model that will support an urban response whilst maintaining the financial viability of the rural brigade



## **SA Country Fire Service.**

There are approximately 16,000 volunteers in 431 Brigades. (*About SA CFS* [www.org.cfs.org.au](http://www.org.cfs.org.au) )

### **Issues**

CFS is not currently experiencing notable difficulties in volunteer recruitment. However, several issues associated with volunteer recruitment/retention have been identified as being worthy of attention.

The first of these is a rate of entry of Cadets (Juniors) into the Volunteer ranks (approximately 35%) that, perhaps, could be raised.

Like most rural fire services, the past five years have seen considerable organisational change, much of which has involved greater formalisation in areas such as training requirements and administrative reporting. There is some concern that the changes may have impacted negatively on some volunteers, particularly older long-serving volunteers, reducing their level of commitment to remaining with the organisation.

There are indications that changed economic and social conditions may be causing some employers to be reluctant to release volunteers for long periods (for example, to travel interstate for “campaign” type fires).

There is some concern that general pressures on families may be such as to lower commitment to remain with the organisation for some volunteers.

Finally, there are indications that brigade memberships may not be very reflective of the makeup of the wider community in some respects, notable an under-representation of women and volunteers from cultural backgrounds other than traditional Anglo-Australian.

### ***Initiatives***

A new initiative has commenced recently: “The Recruitment Program”. This has three levels of operation:

State level: community service type advertising/media releases.

Regional level: local TV/radio/newspaper material

Brigade/Township level: in each of the 6 Regions there is a Volunteer Support Officer (VSO) to assist Brigades to recruit. The Program philosophy is that Brigades take responsibility for, and control of, meeting their own recruitment needs.

To facilitate the process a series of one-day Regional Recruitment Workshops are being held. An important tool is the CFS/SES “Volunteer Recruitment Handbook” (CD ROM and hard copy). Three aspects of the recruitment process are distinguished:

- (a) The ‘health check’—a DIY self-examination of the Brigade for “recruiting into” (ie, addressing any identified retention issues);

- (b) Pre-recruitment actions: consequent possible changes in how the Brigade functions;
- (c) Recruitment activities.

An Induction Kit is available for Brigades but its usefulness needs to be evaluated.

A second initiative is “The Leadership Program”. This has three main elements:

- (a) A series of weekend workshops in leadership, lead by CFS training consultants;
- (b) A Management Scholarship Program. Twenty volunteers per year undertake a Certificate 4/Diploma/Advanced Diploma in Community Services (Volunteer Management) done through TAFE/Onkaparinga College;
- (c) Conference program sponsored by ES agencies involving attendance at conferences and visits overseas.

Other training programs introduced recently include:

- (a) A series of ‘awareness-raising’ module - workplace dignity training (harassment, bullying); conflict resolution; team building; and change management. These are delivered to Brigade (CFS)/Unit (SES) volunteers by staff of the Volunteers Management Branch and contract sessional trainers, the modules are of 3 hours duration, and earn a logged “Certificate of Participation”. A ‘gap’ identified is for volunteers needing training in OHS and in Financial Management; and,
- (b) A series of Administrative Forums for Brigade Administrative Officers.

A survey of brigades’ current and anticipated volunteer recruitment needs has just been completed.

A research study (in collaboration with Adelaide University) is in progress investigating the experiences of families with a member who is a volunteer who deployed interstate in the previous fire season.

## **Tasmania Fire Service**

There are approximately 4,800 volunteers in 230 Brigades. (*About TFS* [www.fire.tas.gov.au/mysite/show?pageId=colAbout](http://www.fire.tas.gov.au/mysite/show?pageId=colAbout) )

The majority of these Brigades are in small-to-medium rural communities. Volunteers in these rural Brigades are mostly “blue collar” workers. Some have literacy difficulties, many are self-employed in unskilled or semi-skilled capacities. Brigades on the Launceston and Hobart urban fringes are different in many respects from the rural Brigades, with (generally) higher levels of education, and a higher proportion of female volunteers.

### ***Issues***

Many of the local communities which host brigades are struggling economically, and this means that some brigades experience difficulties in maintaining numbers.

The annual attrition rate for volunteers is estimated to be of the order of 11%, meaning that about 500 volunteers need to be recruited and trained each year to maintain overall numbers. This annual attrition rate figure may be at the “high end” relative to other fire services, but many services acknowledge that their records system makes it difficult to estimate annual attrition rates with any certainty for cross-service comparison.

There is anecdotal evidence that some rural Brigades are quite resistant to the idea of having women members in operational roles.

There is anecdotal evidence that some employers are reluctant to release volunteers to attend incidents because of the negative impact of absences on business.

There are indications that in some Brigades morale is affected by interpersonal conflicts, suggesting a possible need for training in leadership/management/conflict resolution.

It was noted that Junior volunteer programs were quite successful for those brigades which had them, but that few resources were available to help brigades to initiate new programs.

### ***Initiatives***

A TFS Volunteer Recruitment Project has been implemented recently. A Project Officer has been appointed, and workshops have been held to explore problematic issues in recruitment. Recruitment resources/tools needs have been established and procedural shortcomings have been identified. A Volunteers Handbook has been prepared and was reviewed recently to ensure that it is accurate and up to date.

A draft brochure has been prepared which is intended to provide information to employers of volunteer firefighters about the TFS, what volunteers do, who volunteers, ways in which volunteers benefit employers, the training volunteers receive, and insurance cover for volunteers.

## **FESA WA**

There are approximately 26,538 volunteer firefighters in three types of brigades/units: 2,549 volunteers in 135 Volunteer Fire and Rescue Service Brigades; 23,685 volunteers in 660 Volunteer Bush Fire Brigades; and 304 volunteers in 12 FESA multi-functional units in regional and remote locations where emergency services resources are very limited ([www.fesa.wa.gov.au/About\\_FESA/quickfacts.asp](http://www.fesa.wa.gov.au/About_FESA/quickfacts.asp) )

### ***Issues***

FESA WA faces many issues relating to volunteer recruitment/retention in common with other rural fires services. Two additional factors are (a) the great geographical distances involved in State coverage, and (b) a complex historical system of three different kinds of volunteer firefighting organisations with attendant administrative difficulties.

FESA WA has conducted feedback sessions with groups of volunteers to identify key issues relating to volunteer recruitment and retention. The issues identified have been grouped into External (to FESA) Factors and Internal Factors:

#### External factors:

- Changing society, family/work constraints, attitudes to volunteering
- Rural and regional decline, ageing population profiles
- Legislative requirements and litigious concerns
- Equity in the provision of funding and resources
- Varied demographic profiles across WA

#### Internal factors:

- Resistance to change, traditional versus contemporary values, history
- Attraction, recruitment, availability, retention
- Induction, performance measurement, personal development
- Training and education
- OSH, welfare support
- Protection and security
- Administrative and financial management support
- Strategic planning and innovative approaches
- Community understanding and development
- Regional management support with non-operational tasks and issues

There are difficulties in maintaining volunteer numbers in some sparsely populated remote rural locations because of a general rural decline and an ageing population.

There are indications that recent organisational changes, driven by legislative pressures, may be impacting on the commitment of older, long serving volunteers

There is anecdotal evidence of some opposition to women being involved in operational roles in some brigades.

### *Initiatives*

FESA WA has determined that the “cornerstone” to maintaining brigade numbers is retention of volunteers. In line with this, the agency is about to implement a new organisational structure to provide support to volunteers by means of a dedicated unit to deliver services to members.

FESA has identified as a high priority a need to upgrade services to volunteers. It is proposed to establish a unit dedicated to addressing generic volunteer issues. It will function as a “one-stop shop” for volunteers, managers, and their communities. A possible title for the unit is “Volunteer Research and Strategic Services”. The unit will be involved with research, policy development, strategic planning, service delivery standard setting, and data base management. In connection with this last point, FESA will expand the range of information collected about its volunteers so as to facilitate strategic planning in relation to volunteer recruitment and retention.

## APPENDIX B

# Firefighting safety to the fore, but volunteer firefighters fade

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**Attracting volunteer firefighters, and ensuring they make safe decisions in a fire, is a hot issue. By Carolyn Rance.**

Australia's new Bushfire Co-operative Research Centre in East Melbourne will ensure that firefighters have access to the latest findings on bushfire prevention and control.

Opened in December by Science Minister Peter McGauran, the centre is already working with State and Federal Government departments, universities, fire authorities, the CSIRO, Bureau of Meteorology and research organisations in the United States, Israel, Canada, Scotland, Germany and South Africa.

It is co-ordinating a range of Australian research projects that focus on bushfire behaviour; the environmental impact of fires and fire prevention strategies, and ways to increase the safety of people in bushfire-prone areas.

At La Trobe University, a team led by Dr. Mary Omodei, a senior lecturer in psychological science, is investigating some of the human aspects of bushfires, including how to lift volunteer numbers and how to foster safer decision making at the fire front.

"Despite heavy reliance on fire prediction and hazard models and fire control and suppression technologies, firefighting is ultimately a human activity requiring people to form risk assessments on the spot and initiate courses of action," Dr. Omodei says.

"Firefighter safety, both in bushfires and brigade activities and training, requires that individuals be aware of, and give adequate attention to, the safety implications of any decisions they might implement."

Her team aims to identify psychological and operational factors that can impede safe decision making and develop guidelines to counter them. One member, Dr. Jim McLennan, is also looking at ways that fire brigades can reverse a decline in volunteer numbers.

A former associate professor in Swinburne University of Technology's psychology department, he joined the team at La Trobe University last year to pursue research interests in volunteering and emergency decision making.

"Society as we know it just could not function without volunteers." He says. "Just think of Meals on Wheels, care of the elderly, support in the criminal justice system; it goes on and on."

As a lecturer in counselling psychology at Swinburne for 23 years, Dr. McLennan first became interested in the decision-making challenges that can face volunteers when Victoria's deinstitutionalisation of mental health services in the early 1990s had unanticipated consequences.

“Telephone counselling agencies that had been established largely for suicide prevention were suddenly overwhelmed with calls from people with a psychiatric history. I was asked to look at how volunteers could be trained to deal with this change and make decisions on appropriate action.” he says.

After the Linton bushfire tragedy in 1998, when five volunteer firefighters from Geelong West died, Dr. McLennan and Dr. Omodei were asked to report on some of the human factors that might have contributed to the deaths.

“Issues concerning volunteer firefighters, their awareness of safety and their propensity to take risks emerged as significant issues . . . The tragedy and the subsequent inquest led to a realisation that to some degree, volunteers had been taken for granted and insufficient attention paid to training in personal safety and the provision of the best available protective equipment. Fire services and government policy makers became aware of occupational health and safety and legal issues,” he says.

Dr. McLennan describes the five years since the Linton deaths as a time of upheaval and change for rural fire brigades which were already suffering a decline in volunteers.

Many brigades already had an ageing, all-male membership and were short of recruits due to reductions in the farm labour workforce and the tendency for young country people to move to the city for education and work. On the fringes of large towns and capital cities there was often little tradition of volunteerism.

Now anecdotal evidence suggests that the tighter system of record keeping after the Linton tragedy is considered overly onerous by some volunteers: “There is a need for a systematic survey of the older, experienced rural firefighters to find out what has been the effect of this five years of change on the experience of being a volunteer,” says Dr. McLennan.

Other questions that need to be asked concern the relationship between volunteer firefighting and the paid employment of volunteers. Brigade captains report that the outsourcing of work by local government and the privatisations of semi-government authorities has had an impact on volunteer availability.

“Many more people are now self-employed or working for small firms. Their absences on firefighting occasions cannot be so easily absorbed. We don’t have systematic information about how employers view having volunteer firefighters as employees and we don’t know enough about the level and nature of the difficulties these employers experience when people down tools to go off and deal with an emergency”.

Research is also needed on who volunteers and who does not: “There are relatively few women in operational roles and they tend to be in the major regional centres – Ballarat, Bendigo and Geelong – and on the urban fringe. There are very few out in the true rural areas. That might be that traditional attitudes lead them to think this is not what women do.

“Maybe there are some attitudes within the brigades themselves that women should be in support roles. If that is the case, and those attitudes could be addressed, we would suddenly have a new potential pool of volunteers.

“Similarly, it appears that in areas where there is an influx of new residents through immigration, these people are not represented in the volunteer firefighting service,” Dr. McLennan says. “This may be a cultural issue – they may think that firefighting is related to government or the military. If that is so, community education programs could be developed to tell people that firefighters are volunteers.”

Dr. McLennan says that while the Linton tragedy highlighted the risks of firefighting, it is important for people to understand that once they join a brigade, they become a member of “a distinguished community within a community.”