

**SOUTH AUSTRALIAN  
VOLUNTEER  
FIRE BRIGADES  
ASSOCIATION**



**VICTORIAN  
RURAL  
FIRE BRIGADES  
ASSOCIATION**



**ACROSS BORDER  
JOINT WORKING PARTY**

**RESPONSE  
TO THE  
COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENTS  
NATIONAL BUSHFIRE INQUIRY  
INVITATION FOR SUBMISSIONS  
NOVEMBER 2003**

## CONTENTS:

Contents .....	1
Response .....	2
Introduction .....	3
What is the Across Border Working Party and Where Does it Fit .....	4
How Does the Working Party Operate .....	4
Development of Fire Suppression Agencies in Australia .....	5
Communications .....	5
Equipment .....	6
National Approach for Fire Fighting Aircraft .....	7
Training .....	7
Incident Control System .....	8
Public Education / Warning .....	8
Homeland Security .....	9
Recognition of Diversity .....	10
Conclusion .....	11
Annex A – Working Party Discussion Paper.....	12
Annex B – B Ball Letter Re Non Transferability of Qualifications .....	15

## **RESPONSE:**

The South Australian Volunteer Fire Brigades Association / Victorian Rural Fire Brigades Association Across Border Working Party welcomes the opportunity to make this written submission to the Council Of Australian Governments National Bushfire Enquiry and asks for the opportunity to speak to this submission at the enquiry hearings.

This response has been prepared by the Chairman of the Across Border Joint Working Party,

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## **INTRODUCTION:**

This submission has been prepared in response to the call for input into the Council of Australian Governments National Bushfire Enquiry. Copies of the presentation have been circulated to key personnel within the parent organizations and the Australasian Assembly of Volunteer Fire Brigades Association for perusal prior to submission to the enquiry.

It is not an attempt to deal with all of the terms of reference, only those that fit in with the original scope of the working party. As many of the issues raised by the working party encompass issues that involve multiple jurisdictions (federal, state, local government and industry) this enquiry is seen as most appropriate to deal with some of the issues at hand.

The submission does not set out to promote any one service, system, brand of equipment or operating system over another only to promote a national approach to standards operating systems and equipment. A national standard and an environment that makes across border operations seamless is our sole goal.

## **WHAT IS THE ACROSS BORDER WORKING PARTY AND WHERE DOES IT FIT?**

The Across Border Working Party is made up of representatives of both South Australian Volunteer Fire Brigades Association (SAFBA) and Victorian Rural Fire Brigades Association (VRFBA) and co-opted representatives from both Government and private forest organizations and was formed in late 2002 to address the issues of the impediments that compromise fire management and suppression created by border lines and differing governing systems.

Responding to both parent organizations (SAVFBA & VRFBA) as well as the Australasian Assembly of Volunteer Fire Brigades Association (AAVFBA) the working party was set up following submissions to and endorsement by AAVFBA. Whilst the member makeup of the working party is from SAVFBA & VRFBA the charter is to consider difficulties encountered Australia wide and is not limited to the two states.

The working party is endeavouring to reduce impediments across all levels of fire suppression agencies from full time, volunteer and industry agencies.

The original submissions to AAVFBA arose from concerns raised by many fire fighters in the field both on an individual and also group basis who were regularly encountering difficulties when moving from one area of jurisdiction to another.

Whilst having no powers in its own right the aim of the working party is to identify problem areas and raise them at appropriate forums.

## **HOW DOES THE WORKING PARTY OPERATE?**

The working party consists of three volunteer representatives from both of the parent organizations plus invited representatives from both operations and industry as required. All input into the working party is on a voluntary basis and no costs are incurred.

The working party meets on an as needs basis as required however most of its business is conducted via e-mail and electronic media.

As issues are raised they are discussed and acted upon by the working party and raised in any forum that is seen as appropriate. These issues are also passed back to the parent organizations for them to act upon as they see fit.

Reports to the parent organizations are presented on at least an annual basis comprising a comprehensive overview of the activities undertaken over that period and a report on the outcomes.

## **DEVELOPMENT OF FIRE SUPPRESSION AGENCIES IN AUSTRALIA**

Fire suppression agencies within Australia have developed on a State by State and Industry by Industry basis over many years leading to a situation where every State and Industry are working to a different set of standards. This is no problem whilst working within a particular state or industry but as soon as operations require an agency to move across its border or work with another agency within its own border difficulties are immediately experienced. In many cases this makes for unsafe and ineffective fire fighting operations as the interstate agency brought in to complete a task have not been trained or experienced that particular type of fire suppression technique.

Problems are encountered on a regular basis as fire does not respect boundaries and often a single incident can encompass two or more areas of responsibility.

The incidence of multi agency response to a single incident have risen significantly over the past few years with the improvement in equipment available to the individual agencies making them more mobile and able to respond long distances in realistic time frames.

## **COMMUNICATIONS**

Currently each State / Organization has its own communication network, which are not compatible with adjoining States. Example being South Australia has recently transitioned across to a UHF system while Victoria is using a VHF system. The UHF system used in South Australia is modelled on a trunking system that when within its area of coverage (the state of SA) is extremely efficient, however when moving outside of this footprint the capability of the system is very limited, this is also applicable to other services within Australia.

Whenever any suppression agency moves out of its primary response area communication difficulties are experienced and under the current communications situation it is almost impossible for operators from different agencies to communicate to one another while attending the same incident.

These problems have been encountered frequently over the last few years with major deployments into New South Wales, Australian Capitol Territory, and Victoria as well as numerous smaller incidents involving local responses over State borders. Compounding these difficulties is the poor coverage of the mobile phone system within the country regions, while there is a "reasonable" coverage along major highways as soon as you move off of the highway coverage, both Digital and CDMA drops off to nothing exceptionally quickly.

There needs to be a national approach to Emergency Service communications to allow for better command and control of incidents, we are not proposing to dismantle each States communication systems rather we are proposing that there be a National Cross Border Communications Strategy which could potentially lead to a National Band Plan for all Fire Services. This would allow all agencies that are attending a single incident to be able to communicate at all levels of command as well as on ground between frontline operational vehicles.

## **EQUIPMENT**

Currently it is almost impossible for appliances from different organizations to work together as each State has different standards for hose couplings / threads. A South Australian appliance is not able to draw water from street hydrants in the Eastern States and vice versa as the fittings on the street hydrants are different. Supply of a standpipe from the relevant local combatant authority will not alleviate this situation as the threads on the head of the standpipe as well as all of the threads used on the appliances differ as well. An interim fix to this problem would be the sourcing and supply of adaptors from one system to another however in the long term Fire Services across Australia need to be looking to developing and moving to a national standard of hose threads and couplings.

While not limiting the ability for each organization to design fire fighting appliances to suit individual needs there needs to be a National approach to the purchasing of Cab Chassis, Body Building of Appliances and Equipment purchasing eg Pumps; Hoses; Branch's etc. Historically each organization has sourced its equipment on an individual basis, however in many cases the equipment sourced has been identical to that sourced by other organizations. By all organizations getting together and letting 1 standard contract there would be large savings to be made due to the size of the contract that was let as well as being a big step towards a National standard for fire fighting equipment. Having made this statement we realise there is a need for some specialist equipment for individual areas / industries and while a rural fire appliance may not necessarily be ideal for forestry use. However there could be the ability to procure a limited number of basic specifications that can be adapted to specific uses.

The development of a National standard and design for Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) has the potential for major cost savings, at present each organization is working to a National standard however there are subtle differences eg colour, positioning of pockets and reflective stripes etc. These changes while only cosmetic are preventing the letting of National orders and denying the associated cost savings that go with bulk purchasing.

National rank structure / marking for helmets and uniforms is needed to reduce confusion as to qualifications. Ideally all fire fighting organizations should have an identical rank marking for easy identification when working in multi agency incidents. At present the rank markings used in South Australia and Victoria are direct opposites in SA a white helmet represents a fire fighter and a yellow helmet represents a brigade officer, in Vic the opposite is the case with fire fighters wearing yellow helmets and brigade officers being signified by white helmets. This is very confusing.

Adoption of these points would go a long way to making a seamless operational environment across borders and potentially bring about significant cost savings.

## **NATIONAL APPROACH FOR FIRE FIGHTING AIRCRAFT**

We recognize that Aircraft are a valuable resource to aid fire fighting operations and believe that a National approach needs to be further developed to ensure that these resources are available when and where required and supported.

The use of aircraft has been improved drastically over the last few years with good support from the Federal Government and while we see this as a positive move further support, especially in the form of financial support to the States could see this become even more beneficial.

With better co-ordination the presently available aerial assets could be better utilized at little extra expense, this includes having the appropriate type of aircraft available at any given location as well as the appropriate support facilities for that type of aircraft.

## **TRAINING**

Promotion of transition from Australian Fire Advisory Council (AFAC) standards to Public Safety Training Package Fire Sector (PSTPFS - ITAB) needs to be high on any agenda and all States need to adopt the standard to ensure portability of qualifications when people move across State borders and join different agencies.

A National Validation and Mapping process for training needs to be developed to safeguard the standard of training and ensure consistency across the States.

A commonly agreed standard, uniformity in training material and a consistent level of assessment to National competencies would put us in a position where when a person transfers from one agency to another all that would be required is a short bridging course.

Unfortunately at present there is little or no recognition of training qualifications between agencies leaving us in the position where someone who has completed multiple specialist courses with one agency getting no recognition from the agency they are transferring to. This is graphically outlined in the letter from Mr Brian Ball as attached (Annex B), when transferring from one agency to another none of Mr Ball's training or qualifications were accepted resulting in him having to undertake many levels of training that he had already completed satisfactorily to National standards.

This principal needs also to be applied to industry agencies to ensure that they fit into the National framework and to maintain consistency across all agencies that combat fire.

It is important that training provided to fire suppression personnel is to an agreed National standard no matter where it is provided and that all training is recognised by agencies Australia wide.

## **INCIDENT CONTROL SYSTEMS**

We strongly support and promote a National approach to ICS. The Australian Inter-service Incident Management System (AIIMS) Incident Control System (ICS) is a proven model that works exceptionally well and we seek promotion of the ICS within all agencies at every opportunity. When moving from one jurisdiction to another command is simplified if the ICS is the same as what crews and commanders have been used to. By using the ICS system at every opportunity the command of an incident that requires the resources of more than one agency will flow much more smoothly.

## **PUBLIC EDUCATION / WARNINGS**

At present every State uses their own model for public education to fire and the associated warnings that go with fire restrictions and levels of warning that are broadcast to the public during fire operations, this is not only confusing for the general public but also we believe may be dangerous to the public if they are unaware of the meaning of a particular warning.

The signs used to identify Total Fire Bans (TFB) vary from State to State making it hard for people travelling across State Borders to recognise that there is a TFB in place.

Public warnings issued over the media in relation to the condition of an occurring fire vary between States, once again someone crossing a State Border is unlikely to immediately identify with the terminology of warnings that are being used. In South Australia these warnings are called Phase Warnings and are rated from one to four, however in other States different terminology and ratings are used leaving the way open for confusion or misinterpretation of a particular warning.

We are promoting the creation of a National standard for the Warning of Total Fire Bans and common messages and signage to warn the public when a TFB is in place.

We are also seeking a National standard and approach to warning the public of the status of a going fire and the danger posed to themselves / their assets during fire operations and what actions they should take in response to these warnings.

## **HOMELAND SECURITY**

With the increased threat of terrorism that Australia is facing at present outer defence forces that can communicate with each other, require an Inner Defence arrangement where Police, Fire, Ambulance etc can communicate and plan. This should include a National perspective for fire fighting and other emergencies including homeland terrorism, which could encompass all agencies Nation wide.

While the overall management of any terrorism incident will be at a level higher than the emergency services it will be the emergency services that are faced with the direct task of dealing with the aftermath of any incident. We need look no further then the 911 terrorist attack in America to see the consequences of this type of incident, many of the lives lost were those of emergency service workers in particular fire fighters who were trying to deal with the aftermath of the attack. It has since been revealed that in this incident much of the communications system and chain of command broke down on that day which significantly impacted upon the number of emergency service workers who were injured or killed.

Inner defence arrangements in Australia need to be strengthened and lines of communication and command strengthened between not only the inner defence agencies but also the outer defence agencies to enable us to better respond to any terrorist attack that may occur and promote the safety of all personnel who are tasked to deal with such an incident.

## **RECOGNITION OF DIVERSITY**

Many Industries across Australia Fund Manage and Maintain their own fire fighting equipment and systems, this covers all aspects of industry from plantation tree farms to heavy manufacturing industry, in many cases these fire management systems are run in isolation to the State run fire services. The efficiency of fire fighting operations where you have two agencies attempting to combat the one incident in complete isolation to one another is severely limited, as all agencies are in the same business "Protecting Life and Property" it would seem prudent to integrate these industry brigades into their States agencies.

Currently in some States Industry Brigades are run in total isolation to other Agencies locally resulting in a large gulf between Organizations and poor on fire ground performance by the whole team. We are not looking at taking over these Industry Brigades, rather integrating them with the Other Agencies to allow for them to work closely side by side under one fire ground chain of command whilst still maintaining some level of administrative autonomy.

By integrating industry brigades into State agencies we would be reducing impediments to joint operations, ensuring that industry personnel are receiving appropriate and adequate training, reducing indemnity problems and promoting the health and safety of industry employees under the one branch of Occupational Health Safety and Welfare (OHS&W)

## **CONCLUSION**

The Across Border Working Party has been formed to progress issues specific to across border operations in response to calls from volunteers from fire services across Australia. The sole aim of the working party is to highlight problems encountered in appropriate forums in an effort to reduce the impediments encountered by fire fighters when operating in situations where their total efficiency is reduced by problems encountered when working in areas under the control of another agency.

Members of the Across Border Working Party thanks the COAG National Bushfire Enquiry for the opportunity to raise these issues that are of importance to volunteers Australia wide.

Attached (Annex A) is a copy of discussion paper prepared by our committee and circulated to interested parties for comment.

The committee of the Across Border Working Party would be interested in making a personal presentation to your enquiry to expand on the issues as outlined above if the enquiry panel seen fit.

We welcome the enquiry into Bushfire Management, Prevention and Mitigation and look forward to the release of the enquiry's findings.

# **R J Hall**

Rex Hall AFSM MAIES

Chairman  
Across Border Working Party

## ANNEX A

### *Discussion Paper*

# PROPOSAL

The recommendations as presented in this paper are considered and actioned by the Australian Assembly of Volunteer Fire Brigades Associations Inc and Mr David Hawker MP, Federal Member for Wannon. This is recommended to encourage State Fire and Emergency Authorities to adopt a National approach utilising AFAC and EMA to prepare the National Strategy.

## BACKGROUND

In 2002 the Assembly considered a presentation by Mr Rex Hall AFSM, of the South Australian Volunteer Fire Brigades Association outlining a number of issues faced by Volunteers when dealing with emergencies in border areas. This presentation prompted a discussion at the assembly and resulted in the following motion being supported “it was agreed the volunteers within CFS (SA) and CFA (Vic) develop a process for cross-border co-operation and submit to the assembly at a later time”. This resulted in a working party being established with representatives from the South Australian Volunteer Fire Brigades Association (SAVFBA) and Victorian Rural Fire Brigades Association (VFRBA). This working party met in May 2003 chaired by Mr Rex Hall at Naracoorte in SA at which time a number of issues were discussed.

From the discussions it was evident Volunteers had been facing a number of issues when dealing with emergencies in Border areas for a considerable time and change was slow in making the job easier for the Volunteers. Some examples of issues are: Recognition of training competencies; Common adaptors for hoses; Communications; Opportunities for bulk purchasing benefits etc.

Stakeholder participation should include:

- AFAC and EMA.
- Development of National Strategies.
- Consideration to Homeland Security arrangements and opportunities.
- Use of Commonwealth technologies eg Coast Watch Aircraft etc.

## DISCUSSION

At a fire adjacent to the border between SA and Vic in January 2002, Mr Rex Hall of SACFS and Mr Garry Smith of Vic CFA undertook joint management efforts, which highlighted a number of issues now being presented. Over the past 2 Fire Danger Seasons, we have seen a number of interstate deployments by a number of fire agencies in support of major fire events. These deployments have included agencies sending troops or troops and vehicles/equipment, this has presented a number of challenges in areas of training on unfamiliar equipment, compatibility of equipment, access to water, terminology etc. In general terms these interstate deployments have proved successful, however improvements can always be made and lessons learnt from these deployments should also be considered in a national perspective.

During the workshop participants were asked to identify the challenges faced when dealing with emergencies in these border areas, the information below is a summary of these providing some information associated with them.

*Communications:*

- It is very evident each State has its own communication network, which are not compatible with adjoining States, example being SA has recently transitioned across to UHF system while in Victoria VHF is used.
- Potential for use of UHF CB in rural areas, as this is widely used resource available in all areas.
- Development of a National Cross Border Communications Strategy, which could potentially lead to a National Band Plan for all Fire Services.
- Consideration to use of Mobile Phone Network in High Risk Areas, currently insufficient coverage available.
- Technology for communications needs to be investigated, think outside current pathways, may be able to use Military as a model.

*Equipment:*

- Adaptors for ease of seamless operation across borders.
- Development of a National standard for hose threads etc.
- National approach to Cab Chassis purchasing, Body Building of Appliances, Equipment purchasing eg Pumps; hoses; Branch's etc.
- PPC design and purchase. Development of a National rank structure/markings for helmets.
- Bulk purchasing in general, \$ to be saved.

*National Approach for Fire Fighting Aircraft:*

- It is recognised these are valuable resources and a National approach needs to be further developed to ensure these resources are available where required and supported.

*Training:*

- Transition from AFAC standard to ITABS.
- Need for a National Mapping Process of training.
- All States need to adopt standard to ensure portability for people when they move across borders and join different agencies.
- Requirement to develop a National Validation process for training.
- Common training material.

*Incident Control Systems:*

- Support and promote National approach to ICS.

*Public Education/Warning:*

- Development of National Standard for Warning of Total Fire Bans.
- Common messages for warning public on associated dangers faced during Fire Danger season.

*Homeland Security:*

- Outer defence agencies eg: defence forces that can communicate with each other. Require an Inner Defence arrangement where Police, Fire, Ambulance etc can communicate and plan. This should include a national perspective for fire fighting and other emergencies including homeland terrorism, which could encompass all agencies nation wide.

*Recognition of Diversity:*

- National approach to Industry Brigades and integration into each States agencies, all in the same business, protecting the community.
- Reduce existence of impediments to cross border operations, seamless environment eg: Indemnity, OHS etc.

**RECOMMENDATION**

1. To be considered at the August 2003 meeting of the Australasian Assembly Conference.
2. Use of Australian Standards and Specifications.
3. Bulk Purchasing of vehicles; equipment and protective clothing; communications etc.
4. Common National Accredited training implemented by State agencies for ease of training recognition.
5. Support and promotion of national approach to Incident Control System.
6. National approach to use of aircraft for fire fighting.
7. National Communications Strategy needs to go across agencies Ambulance, Police, Fire.
8. Reduce existence of impediments to cross border operations, seamless environment eg: indemnity, OHS and Incident Management.
9. National approach to Industry Brigades and integration into each States agencies, all in the same business, protecting the community.
10. Inner Defence arrangements be developed and implemented.
11. That each Volunteer body discuss these issues with its State and federal Members.
12. These approaches should consider the involvement of other volunteer emergency agencies.
13. A National Summit be arranged and conducted to consider issues as described.

## **Mr Rex Hall AFSM**

**Chairperson  
Joint Working Party**

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**ANNEX B**

B. J. Ball  
256 Melville Forrest Rd  
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7<sup>th</sup> November 2003

Mr Rex Hall  
Chairman  
Across Border Working Party  
26 Foster St  
Naracoorte SA 5271

Dear Rex,

Having heard of the working party that you are chairing I thought this may be of interest to you.

May I take this opportunity to explain some of the problems I have encountered with my shift from one State to another. When I shifted from S.A. to Vic. I decided to continue with my fire service. To this end I joined the Hamilton unit and was made very welcome. Shortly after joining I was asked how many qualifications I had currently running. I presented the list which I held and they were sent away for approval, but this proved a stumbling block. A reply was received at the station that the particular qualifications did not correspond with anything in Victoria. I then applied to the C.F.S. for a complete set of my qualifications on official letterheads, and the current standards relevant to the particular courses. This paperwork was again sent away for recognition, but again nothing was forthcoming regarding recognition. As a result of all this delay, I have given up on trying to transfer qualifications across and will now attempt to gain the same skills recognition as the courses become available. In this age where people are very mobile with their work of life style, I believe a national standard should be set and observed by all fire services so that people can gain and keep accreditations no matter where they live. I firmly believe in keeping skills up to date and testing for current competency, but as long as everyone is reading the same book, this will be made a lot easier and far less frustrating.

I hope this letter will help to strengthen the push for standardisation of the services, as we have for too long struggled with cross border problems of training standards, radio communication differences and fitting interchange problems. In this day and age, the volunteer is under enough pressure to preform their duty without the added frustration of what I believe are unnecessary impediments to preforming their tasks well.

Yours Sincerely,

**Brian Ball**

Brian Ball

