

Recruiting and Retaining Australia's Volunteer Firefighters

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Project: Enhancing Volunteerism (D3)
Program: D - Protecting People and Property

1. Abstract

This Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre (CRC) project aims to enhance recruitment and retention of Australia's rural fire services volunteers. This paper reports on findings from preliminary investigations of current concerns about present and future volunteer fire fighter numbers. A research agenda addressing these concerns is then outlined.

2. Introduction

Australia is one of the most bushfire-prone countries in the world. The burden of protecting people, property, and the natural environment in vulnerable rural regions in all states and territories falls largely on volunteer rural fire services. In 2004/5, the eight Australian volunteer rural fire services comprised approximately 214,000 volunteers, with numbers in each state and territory as shown below:

ACT Rural Fire Service	350
Country Fire Authority Victoria	58,000
Fire and Emergency Service Authority WA	22,000
NSW Rural Fire Service	68,000
NT Fire & Rescue Service	200
QLD Fire & Rescue Service (Rural Fires)	44,000
SA Country Fire Service	16,000
Tasmania Fire Service	5,000

The contribution by volunteer firefighters to the Australian economy is considerable. A report prepared for CFA estimated, conservatively, that Victoria's volunteer firefighters saved the State some \$480 million in the year 2000-2001; a figure three times the annual CFA operating budget at the time (Hourigan, 2003). As several commentators have noted, if the cost of current levels of community protection against fires provided by volunteers had to be assumed fully by state and/or local governments, the financial impost involved would probably be regarded as intolerable by the taxpayers/ratepayers (Gledhill, 2001; Turner, 2004).

3. Recruitment and retention Issues

Most rural fire services have reported declines in their numbers of volunteers over recent years. Figure 1 illustrates this for CFA Victoria. Another issue of concern is a general increase in the average age of volunteers. Figure 2 shows the age profile for Queensland Fire and Rescue Service (Rural Fires) volunteers in 2003-4: 31% of the volunteer membership was aged 55 years or more.

All fire services report a common set of current difficulties associated with volunteer numbers:

- In many rural communities, volunteer brigade member numbers have dropped and those remaining are ageing.
- In some new housing developments on urban/rural fringes, brigade memberships remain low, notwithstanding increased protection level needs.
- For many brigades on urban/rural fringes, it is difficult to find crews 9-5 weekdays.

Other issues identified include:

- Under-representation of volunteers from a non-Anglo Australian cultural background.
- Under-representation of women, particularly in operational roles.

4. Contributions so far

To date, the Bushfire CRC Volunteerism Project team has produced five major reports for fire services:

- Volunteer recruitment and retention issues.
- Fire services volunteers data base management systems—in most instances these do not provide fire services with the information needed for strategic planning and policy development.
- Profiles of Australia's volunteer firefighters—this highlights the ageing volunteer memberships of many fire services
- A review of the literature (Australian and overseas) relating to several emergency services volunteers recruitment and retention issues
- Women volunteers in fire services.

Three brief reports have also been distributed:

- Exit interviews and surveys of volunteers
- Fire services' volunteer recognition and service award systems—this suggests a need for fire services to review their current schemes so as to ensure the schemes match the needs of today's volunteers
- Costs of replacing volunteers who leave.

A research data base of literature relating to emergency services volunteers—mostly in the form of articles and reports—has been prepared and is available to all who request this.

5. Research priorities

Our research makes it clear that fire services need good quality information to guide their responses to the current and future threats to volunteer numbers. Future threats are posed by (a) demographic changes (an ageing population and changes in the makeup of households), and (b) economic changes—particularly structural changes in the nature of work.

In particular, fire services need information about:

- Their communities—who does, and does not, volunteer and why
- Their volunteers—who stays, who leaves, and why.
- The needs of key "third parties"—employers of volunteers, and families of volunteers

6. Research in progress

The following projects are being undertaken jointly with fire agencies:

- CFA: Longitudinal follow-up study of new volunteers—at 6 months; 12 months; two years.
- CFA: Survey of four new communities in Melbourne's 'growth corridors'—is motivation to volunteer with emergency services linked to 'sense of community'?
- NSW RFS: Survey of 13 rural towns and communities (6,000 households) in the NSW 'Grain Belt'—knowledge of the rural fire service and volunteering; expectations; perceived barriers to volunteering
- NSW RFS: Survey of employers of volunteers—knowledge; concerns; needs.
- NSW FB: Survey of retained firefighters—nature of agreements with employers
- SA CFS: Survey of women volunteers—experiences; retention and recruitment issues
- TFS: Volunteers needs for training in leadership; people management; conflict and dispute resolution.

7. References

- Hourigan, M. (2001). *The value to Victoria of volunteer contributions to Country Fire Authority services*. Consultant's report, CFA, Burwood East.
- Gledhill, J. (2001). *Sustaining volunteerism in emergency services: Funding*. Canberra: Australasian Fire Authorities Council.
- Turner, Q. (2004). *Volunteerism – Where to from here?* Paper presented at the 11th Annual Conference of the Australasian Fire Authorities Council; Perth.

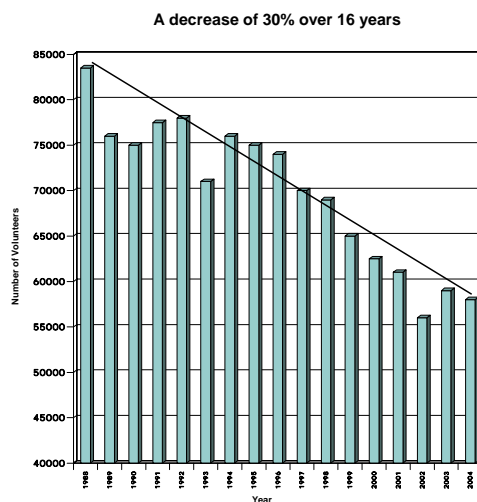


Figure 1: CFA Volunteer Numbers 1988 to 2004

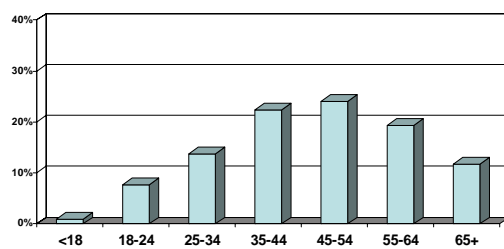


Figure 2: Age profile – QLD F & R S (Rural) volunteers (2004)

