

**UNITED FIREFIGHTERS
UNION OF AUSTRALIA**



ACT BRANCH

ACT Fire and Rescue Preparedness 20 Years after the 2003 Fires

This status report has been prepared by the United Firefighters Union ACT Branch. Our intention is to provide an honest and frank assessment of firefighting capability and systemic failures that remain unaddressed, in a spirit of respect to those who suffered trauma and loss on January 18 2003.

Contrary to the recommendations of the “Inquiry into Operational Response to the January 2003 Bushfires” (“The McLeod Report”) and the Coronial Inquest, the ACT Emergency Services Agency continues to seek to redefine itself as an operational service. Centralisation of assets and expenditure is demonstrated by an estimated 60% growth in ESA positions since 2016 at the expense of frontline services. Despite a \$45 million commitment by the ACT Government in 2020 to expand ACT Fire and Rescue, funding has not flowed to the fire service as intended:

- Acton fire station, which was agreed to be completed by 31 December 2021 remains a vacant block of land.
- The additional fire truck and crew intended for Acton has not been deployed.
- Only two of the 12.7 firefighter day work positions agreed to be provided by 2024 have been appointed.
- Over the last 20 years ESA interference in workforce planning has delayed or stopped recruitment and promotion on several occasions. This has impacted ACTF&R’s ability to plan, train, manage skills mix, develop capability, manage overtime and fatigue. While there was no firefighter recruitment at all between 2013 and mid 2016, in the 2018 19 financial year only 6 firefighters were recruited. ACTF&R continues to struggle to make up for these poor organisational decisions.
- Health screening for firefighters agreed upon in 2020 has not commenced.
- Mandatory skills maintenance across 22 components of firefighter training has not been undertaken.
- Accrued leave remains unacceptably high and applications by firefighters to take leave have been refused for reasons including cost.
- Veterans of the 2003 fires in transition to retirement, who served with distinction, were pressured in 2022 to not take their accrued leave and instead return to work or to end their employment and accept a pay out of their leave
- Since June 2022 fire fighters have been without adequate tools and equipment essential for training

- The use of overtime remains unacceptably high (Approx \$3 Million for the half year to 31 Dec 2022)
- The newest fire trucks procured for ACT Fire and Rescue suffer the same faults as trucks which in 2003 left firefighters stranded among burning houses in Duffy through brake failures and trucks catching fire. (plastic air intakes and unprotected brake lines). The same new trucks have been provided without essential equipment.
- The cohort of ACT Fire and Rescue Recruits who graduated in December 2022 are being underpaid.

The failings outlined above have occurred through a distressing growth of an unaccountable and secretive organisational culture. Further symptoms of this culture include:

- The ACT Legislative Assembly amended the Emergency Services Act in December 2021 to expand the senior management of the Emergency Service Agency. The Legislative Assembly was told that the changes had been subject to consultation with key stakeholders. Firefighters and the UFU, as their industrial representative, were completely blindsided by these amendments to the Emergency Act. No explanation has ever been given as to how this occurred or who was responsible for the Legislative Assembly being misled.
- The Emergency Services Operational Review Group (ESORG) was established to bring together biannually representatives of all emergency services, staff and volunteers. Without any announcement it was abolished and has not met since Nov 2020.
- The Bushfire Council was abolished in 2021 against the will of its members, including rural land holders
- The Bush Fire Abatement Zone recommended by the McLeod report and the Coronial inquest was abolished.
- The Coroner's inquest into the 2003 fires was completed 3 years and 11 months after the 2003 fires. When questioned by the Coroner about the events of the 2003 fire, the 6 most senior officers of the Emergency Services Bureau and the Department of Justice and Community Safety gave answers to the effect of "I don't recall" or "I don't remember" 1,108 times. The Coroner stated " This apparent corporate loss of memory exacerbated the difficulty of establishing the facts"
The Coroner's inquiry into the 2019 fires remains incomplete and will not reconvene until April 2023. The community should not have to wait 3 years to receive answers about how it came to be that 37% of the ACT land area was reduced to cinders
- The true costs of ACT Fire and Rescue and the ACT Rural Fire Service are hidden from the public. While \$45 million was allocated by the government in 2020 to modernise ACT Fire and Rescue, the public, fire fighters, and their representatives have no way of knowing whether this money is being spent as intended by the government. The operating revenue of the fire services remains cloaked by layers of bureaucracy which

were identified as unacceptable by the Coroner and the McLeod report after the 2003 bushfires.

Recent history serves to validate the findings of the Coroner and the McLeod inquiry into the 2003 bushfires. In so far as organisational arrangements are concerned, their recommendations continue to resonate

The UFU, in the interests of transparency accountability and community safety recommends the following:

- An inquiry by the Auditor General into the expenditure of the \$45 million allocated by the ACT Government for the purposes of fire services modernisation and enhancement.
- An investigation by the ACT Integrity Commission into the procurement processes of the Emergency Services Agency.
- The recasting of the Emergency Services Agency as an administrative and coordination body (as opposed to an operational service) as recommended following the 2003 fires.
- Restructure of ACT Fire and Rescue as an enhanced fire and emergency services authority with its own supporting staff. The new authority should be established as a statutory authority with a direct reporting line to the Minister for Emergency Services to enable democratic control, accountability and transparency.
- Mandatory reporting to the ACT Legislative Assembly of expenditure on Fire and Rescue.

Greg McConville

UFU ACT Branch, January 18 2023