

## Chairman's report



Dear Minister

On behalf of the Board, I am pleased to report on the activities of CFA and the administration of the *Country Fire Authority Act 1958* (CFA Act) for the year ended 30 June 2003.

The past year has been one of the most challenging in CFA's history. We have continued to make significant progress in addressing safety and operational change which is progressively enhancing our service levels and setting a solid foundation for future efficiencies, effectiveness and growth. Our major achievements are described in this report and were made during the busiest year ever for fire operations, resulting mainly from six years of drought conditions and particularly warm and dry weather throughout the State. Overall, we attended 35,092 incidents during 2002/03, an increase of 5% over the previous year. While fire remains the major type of incident attended, the number and diversity of other incidents demonstrates that we are much more than a fire service, with over 9% of our activities involving motor vehicle accident rescue and almost 8% involving hazardous materials. The higher number of incidents attended also placed additional demands on our people, resulting in a record 64,981 brigade turnouts, an increase of more than 10% over the previous year.

In addition to attending emergency incidents, our people are also involved in extensive community education activities as part of our overall philosophy to integrate community preparedness and planning with response activities. This reflects the Prevention, Preparedness, Response and Recovery (PPRR) emergency management continuum and the need to achieve efficiencies through best use of human and capital resources depending on the risk facing our communities. We have significantly increased our financial resources to our community education and engagement activities. Our objective is to improve our service delivery by proactively identifying and minimising risks to the communities we serve. This will reduce, but not eliminate, the need for expensive response-readiness infrastructure and will, over time, reduce the extent of increased funding required to meet growing demands for our services.

### **2002/03 summer fire season**

Much of the increase in brigade activity was associated with the extreme summer fire season in which we declared the second highest number of Total Fire Bans ever. The most significant event was the complex of fires in North East Victoria and East Gippsland, which directly involved 8,595 CFA personnel and 674 CFA brigades over a period of 57 active firefighting days.

The fires, which originated on public land, burnt more than 1.1 million hectares of land (about 5% of Victoria), including more than 108,000 hectares of private land. During the fires, 41 dwellings, 213 other buildings, more than 3,000 kilometres of fencing, and more than 9,000 commercial stock were lost. While the losses had a deep impact on the communities affected, they were relatively minor compared to other major Victorian fires such as 'Black Friday' in January 1939 and Ash Wednesday in February 1983 and no lives were lost as a direct result of the fire. This is testament to the relatively successful fire management strategies used, and more importantly to the engagement of the communities directly impacted by the fires, demonstrating the synergies between community safety and operational fire suppression activities which have been the cornerstone of our strategic direction in past years.

Most of the CFA people involved in what has become known as the 'campaign fires' were volunteers who freely gave their time during the traditional holiday season to protect Victorian lives and assets. Their personal cost in terms of time from their families and from work should be acknowledged, as should the support of their families, friends, and employers. We should also acknowledge the significant contribution made by others in the community, including other government agencies, private enterprise and individuals, who provided direct support through the provision of goods and services during this major emergency event. The success of our people in successfully minimising what could have become a disaster for the State is a credit to the ethos of volunteerism within CFA and the Australian spirit.



## **Victorian Bushfire Inquiry**

As with all major incidents, the campaign fires provided CFA with an opportunity to learn from experiences and identify opportunities for improvement. The Victorian Government also used the summer fire season to identify areas for improvement and initiated an Inquiry into the major fires under the auspices of the Office of the Emergency Services Commissioner. As part of our post-fires recovery program, CFA prepared a very detailed submission and made 82 recommendations for consideration to improve the State's preparedness and fire management for future events.

Central to these recommendations was the need for an integrated end-to-end community safety planning regime that formally links prevention planning and emergency planning under the PPRR emergency management continuum, including formal integration of public and private land fire plans. Most importantly, we also identified the need for a more streamlined fire coordination structure. Our clear recommendation is consistent with the findings of the Royal Commission into the 1939 'Black Friday' bushfires that were of a similar size to the fires we recently experienced.

We are pleased that the Inquiry's interim report in August 2003 started to take action to improve fire management practices. In particular, we acknowledge the Inquiry's recommendation that we should modify our operational procedures to ensure better use of local knowledge in fire management at a tactical and strategic level. We had identified this issue through our post-fire recovery program and have taken immediate steps to ensure that we make better use of local knowledge in the future.

## **Financial resources**

Our success during the campaign fires, and the summer fire season as a whole, can be attributed in part to the significant investment we have made over the past three years in new infrastructure and resources and programs designed to improve the operational efficiency, effectiveness and safety of our people. Much of this has been achieved through additional funding under the Strategic Resource Initiative program which is providing total funding of \$98.3 million over four years. During the year, \$19.5 million was allocated under this program to agreed priority projects which included volunteer support, new land, buildings and equipment, training and safety programs. It also included the recruitment and training of new career firefighters to support volunteers in fire stations in Melbourne's outer-metropolitan growth corridors and major regional centres, bringing our total number of career firefighting staff to 425, an increase of almost 36% over the past three years. Progress with these projects is provided in this report.

Under the provisions of the CFA Act, statutory funding contributions are made by the State Government and insurance and other companies. This amounted to \$165.5 million for 2002/03. Statutory contributions formed the majority of our total revenue for the period, which increased by 14.1% over last year to a total of \$196.1 million.

During the year, the State Government conducted a review to evaluate alternative funding models for Victoria's fire services. CFA and volunteer associations participated in this review which assessed a number of options for future funding mechanisms, including modification to the current insurance-based system and property-based systems. The review concluded that the existing funding model remained appropriate. The findings are consistent with CFA's submission to this review.

## **Board changes**

We were saddened by the death of Rob MacLennan who passed away on 28 May 2003. Rob had been a member of the CFA Board since 2001 and made a significant contribution to our Board, and to CFA over many years as a CFA volunteer. He will be greatly missed. During the year, Bill Davies and Helen McGowan retired from the Board; on behalf of CFA I thank them for their valuable contribution to CFA over many years. Two new members have been appointed to the Board: Rick Hill was appointed on 15 March 2003, and Ken King was appointed on 1 July 2003. They both bring new skills and perspectives to the Board and I look forward to working with them.

During the year, and following an extensive search, we appointed Neil Bibby as CFA's Chief Executive Officer from 31 March 2003. Neil's extensive experience, formerly as CFA's Director Community Safety and with the Metropolitan Fire and Emergency Services Board, will guide our future strategic direction in CFA's evolution from a fire service to an integrated emergency management agency.

## Our future

During the year, the Board spent considerable time developing a corporate planning process that will guide CFA's growth and ensure the effective delivery of services to the communities we serve. The new planning regime is aligned to the Board's strategic priorities and to the Government's *Growing Victoria Together* policy. Complementing the new planning process, we have also introduced enhanced reporting arrangements which will enable the Board to more effectively monitor our continued performance and progress in achieving our longer-term goals. Our new corporate planning processes reflect the dynamic nature of planning for Victoria on a whole-of-Government basis. The Board will play an integral role in ensuring safety, self-sufficiency and sustainability of communities during this period of dynamic change.

In conclusion, 2002/03 has been one of the most challenging in CFA's history. We have made significant progress towards achieving our longer-term goals even though we were involved in the most active summer fire season for many years. Our success, both operationally and strategically, was only made possible through the efforts and commitment of all CFA's people. Our success has been achieved through the synergies of many levels of our 'family', including the members of the Board, our staff, and most importantly, our volunteers and their representative organisations. Without their dedication, commitment and commonality of purpose, CFA would not be the organisation it is today. We are indebted to their superb contribution in making CFA one of the most respected and professional volunteer-based emergency management agencies in Australia and the world.



**Len Foster**  
Chairman