

THE FACTS: BUILDING A STRONGER ESA THROUGH STRATEGIC REFORM.

UFU CLAIM 1:

“More firefighters - the ACT is not funding or training enough firefighters. We need more firefighters to replace those retiring, maintain effective fire response times and manage an increasing workload of non-fire incidents.”

ESA RESPONSE:

The ACT Government already employs a comparatively high proportion of firefighters compared to its population base. The ESA has over 338 paid firefighters, over 530 rural fire service volunteers, and 150 trained firefighters in Parks and Conservation Service, Environment and Planning Directorate.

The UFU’s whole campaign lacks recognition of the role the ACT Rural Fire Service has in bushfire prevention, mitigation and response. The premise the UFU is attempting to draw is only paid firefighters can effectively protect Canberra is divisive and goes against the objects of the Emergencies Act and ESA’s mission of working together.

While the ACT’s population is steadily increasing, data also indicates that the demand for fire & rescue services is not. Despite this, the ACT Government has continued to increase funding to deal with emergency incidents. The proactive and preventative measures which are now commonplace, help to maintain very high safety levels for the community we protect and the reason why despite population growth risk has not risen.

The ESA has workforce plans to ensure that the right number of trained emergency response professionals are available in all of our emergency services. One of the proposed reforms, in relation to the ComCen is, in fact, likely to allow trained firefighters to return to their primary role to boost frontline numbers.

The ESA also has 16 new firefighters (4 female, 12 male) currently in training who are due to graduate in late October 2016. This latest intake has been successful in recruiting 25% women. A key focus of the Women in Emergency Services strategy is to ensure that at least 50% of places in future ACTF&R recruitment processes are obtained by women. The ESA has taken the lead nationally in committing to a minimum 50/50 recruitment of women, recognising the value of a more diverse and inclusive workforce.

The ESA is concerned by UFU claims that firefighters are suffering from fatigue. As a result, the ESA will consider the full range of contributory factors that may be affecting the fatigue levels of our staff. These include overtime, personal leave and sickness, returning staff to operational duties, and approvals for secondary employments of staff members.

UFU CLAIM 2:

“Proper Equipment - we do not have enough specialised vehicles for firefighting in tall buildings or managing HAZMAT incidents or those requiring breathing apparatus.”

ESA RESPONSE:

The need for additional specialist resources is assessed on an ongoing basis. There are no reported occasions in which the ESA has not had enough specialised vehicles. The current demand is not increasing but the ESA continues to update, upgrade and improve its specialised vehicles. The ESA considers that it currently has enough specialised vehicles for firefighting in tall buildings, managing HAZMAT incidents, and those requiring breathing apparatus support.

The ACT has a Bronto aerial appliance to deal with emergency incidents in tall buildings. Access to more aerial ladder appliances would not guarantee the safety of the community. While the Bronto is a key element of ACTF&R’s operational capability, the high building standards in place in the ACT and residents’ fire evacuation plans are equally important in ensuring community safety in the event of a fire in a multi-storey building. The ESA has also negotiated with the CSIRO to facilitate access for ESA staff to their Bronto aerial appliance vehicle during emergency situations.

ACTF&R has one dedicated HAZMAT appliance, and one breathing apparatus support vehicle. Both appliances are crewed 24 hours a day by dedicated staff, and there is nothing to suggest that additional appliances of this type are required at this point in time.

In addition there are additional specialist HAZMAT resources available in Platforms On Demand (PODs) and there is a breathing apparatus POD which can be used if required. It has not been deployed at an operational incident yet.

UFU CLAIM 3:

“No part time stations - we cannot protect the new and growing suburbs around Chisholm and Molonglo with part time stations. Response times will suffer and lives will be put at risk. All Canberrans deserve the same level of protection.”

ESA RESPONSE:

There is no plan to introduce part time stations.

UFU CLAIM 4:

“A strong organisation - the Government must not remove firefighters from the emergency command centre or remove firefighter training, Community Resilience and Human Resources from the direction and control of firefighters. Changes like these will leave Fire and Rescue a much weaker organisation, less capable of protecting Canberra.”

ESA RESPONSE:

Firefighting knowledge will be required within the Emergency 000 Communications Centre (ComCen) and to undertake the Incident Management Functions including command and control of firefighting resources, as is current practice during major emergencies.

The community is best served by having more firefighters on the road. The ESA's current model has the same amount of staff regardless of the number of calls per hour. Data shows that at 7:00pm we receive three times more calls to fires than at 3:00am, but currently we maintain the same staffing model in the ComCen at both times. This is an area of improvement. We need more operators at the right time. We need to scale up better for major incidents. Currently, we need to take more firefighters away from their fire appliances to staff the ComCen. The new model puts them where the community needs them most. Consistent with the “all hazards, all services” approach our new ComCen will be staffed by professional emergency call takers to ensure the right advice is provided, the correct service is dispatched and to help us provide faster warnings to the community. We'll have a better system when we have large scale storm events to track and record those people that need assistance so that our crews can attend quicker.

Each of our services will contribute to combined communications, training, human resources, and community resilience, to make our emergency services stronger and more able to protect Canberra and the ACT.

ESA also intends to remove administrative and rostering duties from the ComCen so the firefighters in there can focus exclusively on applying their technical knowledge to incidents rather than filling vacant shifts.

UFU CLAIM 5:

“A strong plan - ACT major bushfire plans are in disarray. The intended bushfire abatement zone, created after 2003 has been rolled back leaving the outer suburbs of Canberra exposed and vulnerable.”

ESA RESPONSE:

The campaign claims that ACT major bushfire plans are in disarray. This could not be further from the truth.

Bushfire management is the subject of the Strategic Bushfire Management Plan. Version 3 of the Strategic Bushfire Management Plan was tabled in the Legislative Assembly in September 2014. The five year plan clearly details the Government's priorities for bushfire prevention and suppression across 12 key objectives.

All of the services associated with bushfire management and suppression have had significant investment and increases in capability since 2003. This includes more than 600 rural firefighters, close to 1,000 CFU volunteers, and Remote Area Firefighting Teams (RAFT). In addition, there are new vehicles, aerial firefighting assets and facilities and land management arrangements.

The existing response arrangements outline that the first response to all grass and bushfires in the ACT will be by the nearest available most appropriate resource, irrespective of jurisdiction or Service. Both ACT fire services continue to work together collaboratively and cohesively in responding to fires across both the built up and rural areas of the ACT.

UFU CLAIM 6:

“Ready for emerging threats - we are not ready for the increasing threats and challenges of terrorism, climate change, population growth and a rapid increase in non-fire rescue incidents such as rescues and car accidents.”

ESA RESPONSE:

- Reported fires and other primary incidents attended by fire service organisations increased from 9,773 in 2002/2003 to 11,154 in 2015/16. This is a 14% increase in total incidents over 14 years or 1% average increase per year.
- ACT Ambulance Service incidents increased from 26,599 in 2002/03 to 49,734 in 2015/16. This is an 87% increase in total incidents over 14 years or a 6.2% average increase per year.

*Note fire service organisations includes ACT Fire and Rescue and ACT Rural Fire Service.



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