



The Hon. Steph Cooke MP
Minister for Emergency Services and Resilience
Minister for Flood Recovery

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Ref: (Insert A#)

Mr Scott Campbell
President
Rural Fire Service Association (RFSA)
Suite 11, 69 York Road
PENRITH NSW 2750

Dear Mr Campbell

Thank you for your correspondence of 31 January 2023 regarding the Pledge of Support for Rural Fire Service Members.

At the outset, I extend my thanks to all NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) volunteers across NSW, who have been critical in the emergency response to the prolonged flooding.

I also extend my thanks to the RFSA and yourself for your collaborative approach to policy development, most notably the recent announcement on adjustments to workers compensation.

I acknowledge the work the RFSA has put into developing the pledge for candidates at the 2023 State Election, which is an opportune time to highlight what the NSW Government continues to do to support the RFS.

The NSW Government recognises the RFS as the largest volunteer fire service in the world and its volunteers, embedded in local communities, are at the heart of all its operations and activities. The RFS's history, values and operations are based on its members' selfless commitment to helping and protecting the community from bush fires and other emergencies, with no expectation of reward or recompense.

The NSW Government is committed to ensuring our emergency services personnel, including volunteer firefighters, have the resources and funding they need to provide their vital services to our communities.

As you would be aware, the NSW Government supported in-principle Recommendation 12 of the independent Flood Inquiry: *SES and RFS Back-Office Merger*. Work in relation to the independent Flood Inquiry recommendations is ongoing through the Department of Premier and Cabinet. The RFS is represented in those discussions, with a commitment of consultation with volunteers. Any back-office merger projects agreed to by the RFS and NSW State Emergency Service will not impact frontline services, the RFS's functions or the role of RFS volunteers.

The NSW Government shares the commitment of the RFS and RFSA to the welfare of their members and effectively managing workers compensation claims arising from their duties. An amendment to the *Workers Compensation (Bush Fire, Emergency and Rescue Services) Act 1987*, passed by Parliament on 23 June 2022, addressed a number of discrepancies in workers compensation arrangements for volunteers.

Additionally, the *Workers Compensation (Firefighters' Presumptive Rights to Compensation) Act 2018* has established presumptive rights to workers compensation for firefighters suffering certain kinds of cancer.

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On 18 January 2023, the NSW Government committed to increasing compensation for volunteers who are seriously injured while performing duties. This change will be enabled through legislation to be introduced in the next term of Government.

The changes involve an increase to lump sum compensation payments for prescribed volunteer workers covered by the Bush Fire, Emergency and Rescue Services scheme (BFERS). The payment available to a volunteer suffering whole person impairment greater than 10 per cent will be increased to the levels available to the general workforce, including ongoing indexation.

Increased risk to the mental health of our emergency services personnel has been one of the consequences of the nature and severity of the horrific 2019/20 Black Summer bush fire season. The NSW Government is investing approximately \$17 million over five years to enhance the mental health support for RFS members, including roles for 18 psychologists. As you will be aware, the RFS also recently launched a comprehensive mental health framework.

The NSW Government has invested \$195.2 million in the RFS fleet in response to the recommendations of the independent Bushfire Inquiry. This investment has delivered more than 400 new and refurbished fire trucks to Brigades across NSW, some of which I have had the privilege to personally hand over.

Planning or construction is continuing on more than 160 RFS projects across the State, representing a combined investment of \$82 million. More than 85 of these are for new Brigade stations, Fire Control Centres and other critical RFS facilities.

The RFS has commissioned research through Monash University to study further enhancements to the safety of RFS appliances, including falling objects and rollover protection and driver awareness. The development of the next generation of the fleet is a priority project, with widespread consultation underway with the members who use and depend on these vehicles, and industry and tertiary leaders.

The RFS has recently completed the rollout of new respiratory protection masks to improve firefighter safety, has completed review of station designs to incorporate dedicated 'clean' and 'dirty' areas, and is commissioning research in conjunction with the University of Wollongong to better understand the types of hazards in the air and on personal protective clothing (PPC) at bush fires and how PPC can be best decontaminated at stations.

Both the NSW Government and I remain steadfast supporters of the RFS and its wonderful members, who are so vital to the safety and security of communities right across NSW.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Stephanie Cooke".

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