



UNITED FIREFIGHTERS UNION OF AUSTRALIA WEST AUSTRALIAN BRANCH

ABN: 31 367 577 278

PRESIDENT: Kevin Jolly *AFSM* SECRETARY: Lea Anderson

PEOPLE'S CLIMATE MARCH - PERTH 29th November 2015

Good morning to you all and I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land and all the elders present, and who have gone before us – the custodians of this land.

My name is Kevin Jolly and I am a professional Firefighter and I am speaking to you on behalf of the members of my Union – the United Firefighters Union in Western Australia.

My members attend 80% of this State's fire incidents, and many of those fires are bush fires, or fires that start in bush land settings and then become catastrophic fires for our citizens and communities across Western Australia.

Firstly this morning I wish to recognise the loss of life in the recent fires in Esperance and South Australia – our sympathy goes out to those people killed and to their families and friends, the volunteer Firefighters and the Professional Officers commanding and supporting crews at those incidents.

I grew up in the Wheat belt and the farmers and family members I hear from regularly record and track the weather and rainfall on their properties and they know that the weather patterns and environmental devastation we are seeing are not merely seasonal.

Most farmers, like Firefighters, recognise the impact of climate change. There is a saying in our industry – “there are no sceptics at the end of a fire hose” – our challenge is to move the bean counters and some of the politicians beyond this part of the debate and we need to see some action and resourcing.

Firefighters in WA and around our nation are seeing more regular catastrophic or "campaign" fires, and the frequency of these fires is increasing. Our bushfire seasons are starting earlier and we do not have the resources to match the risks. **THESE ARE FACTS.**

And as the Climate Council's Burning Issues report sets out – we conservatively need to double our Professional Firefighter numbers and ensure that there is sufficient equipment, capability and Fire and Rescue Service command to support such growth.

The issues we have faced in WA are global issues – we are seeing more catastrophic fires and storm events in our Kimberley region, in the Eastern States of Australia and in the Canada and United States.

In 2015 we cannot afford to be sharing resources with communities in the Northern Hemisphere – again as set out in the Climate Council's Report – the fire seasons are overlapping.

In WA we have a huge geographic area to service – even in the early stages of the analysis of the Esperance fires, it seems clear to our members that there is the need to place more professional resources to support the Volunteers in that region.

Every day, our senior Officers are being forced “to rob Peter to pay Paul”. Firefighters on the ground see this as gambling – and they complain to our Union that the communities they are based in and serve are too often put at risk when they are directed to travel out of their fire districts. Even this month with the catastrophic and early start to our fire season, resources have been drained from the metropolitan area and re-directed to the foothills, Bindoon, and Esperance.

This is not good enough and while we do not blame our State Minister Joe Francis for this situation, he inherited a service characterised by years of neglect and a model that chronically under funds the risk faced across WA –IT IS NOW TIME FOR ALL POLITICIANS to recognise the risks exacerbated by climate change AND TO FUND THE increased personnel and equipment and training that is needed.

The last time I spoke to the broader community I set out a modest demand for Firefighter numbers – we have seen no significant increase in Fire and Rescue Service personnel for many years. The Climate Council's Report recognises that the numbers of Professional Firefighters across Australia needs to double by 2030. And I quote: “these numbers are likely to be conservative because they do not account for the potential lengthening of the Fire Season.

We have gathered here today to join our voices as Firefighters with you and together – we will be heard. Thank you.

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