

## SELECT COMMITTEE FLOOD INQUIRY – FBEU OPENING STATEMENT

Greetings and thank you for the opportunity to speak to our submissions today.

My name is Leighton Drury and I am the State Secretary of the FBEU and have been a firefighter for the last 22 years.

FBEU members work across metropolitan and regional areas throughout NSW From bondi to Broken Hill, Tweed heads to Albury and are involved in all manner of emergency response with the protection of life, property and landscape being our core business.

The FBEU has submitted this paper under on behalf of members who were directly involved in the northern NSW floods earlier this year.

Based off direct feedback from our membership, it has become pertinently clear the Government of NSW must re-think the current arrangements for coordination and response arrangements of NSW's emergency response agencies.

I would like to premise the following points with that The FBEU value and respect the role of volunteers in emergency response as a support agency. They provide vital surge capacity and much needed assistance during these events, but the community of NSW should not, in 2022, with the scale of natural disasters we continue to see, need to rely on a volunteer workforce as their lead emergency response.

The current NSW Emergency Management Plan, nominates the NSW SES as the lead agency in the case of flood, storms and tsunami events,

As outlined in our submissions there are inherent difficulties in a volunteer agency being the nominated lead in major emergencies. Unlike paid staff, volunteers are, by their nature, an unreliable workforce. In emergency response where seconds can be the difference between life and death, loss of property and significant economic loss, it is vital that the initial response is active and ready to go at all times.

It is not reasonable for the NSW Government to expect volunteers to perform in the same manner as a professional workforce.

Professional firefighters, both permanent and retained, are some of the most acutely trained emergency response personnel in NSW and are at the ready to respond seven days a week, 24 hours a day. They are trained in incident management and all manner of emergency response activities including land-based flood rescue and swift water rescue. Swift water Operators are ready to respond in this capacity on a 24/7 basis. On top of this, these firefighters, our members, hone their skills day and night by continuously responding to emergency events and putting their training into regular practice.

FRNSW Senior Officers are trained specifically in incident management and response, equipping them with vital knowledge and skills to manage incidents of this nature. and mange incidents on a day to day basis as part of FRNSW's core work.

This sets them apart from a volunteer workforce.

FRNSW officers and senior officers have hundreds of incidents under the belt and yet when it comes a larger scale incident a less experienced agency, through no fault other than not having anywhere near the volume of work of FRNSW, are put in charge.

Our submissions outlined various failings of SES as an agency to properly train and equip its volunteers to respond as a lead to these events. Various previous inquiries into past events and other submissions to this inquiry have made similar submissions however seem to have fallen on deaf ears.

The FBEU therefore submit that FRNSW should be designated the lead combat agency to tackle these future catastrophic disasters.

The FBEU further submits that in delegating FRNSW as the lead agency for flood, storm and tsunami events, the Government must also ensure they are adequately funded to perform the role. This Government has consistently let professional firefighters down in ensuring they have the necessary resources to do their job.

In just one example, during this event, FRNSW swift water rescue operators reported having to purchase their own wetsuits to respond as they simply weren't readily available from FRNSW. This penny pinching from the current Government must stop if we are to ensure the community of NSW gets the response to these major emergencies it deserves.

Professional Firefighters call on this Government to review not only the response arrangement for NSW emergency response agencies but also the funding allocated to ensure the agency best placed to provide and immediate response is properly funded and resourced.

In our submission, the FBEU has made 9 recommendations which we are happy to take questions on.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear today.

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