

INQUIRY INTO RESPONSE TO MAJOR FLOODING ACROSS NEW SOUTH WALES IN 2022

Organisation: Fire Brigade Employees' Union (FBEU)

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SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO THE RESPONSE TO MAJOR FLOODING ACROSS NSW IN 2022 FIRE BRIGADE EMPLOYEES' UNION (FBEU)

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INTRODUCTION

1. This submission has been prepared by the Fire Brigade Employees' Union (**FBEU**) on behalf of members for the Select Committee Inquiry on the response to major flooding across NSW in 2022. The submissions address parts (1a) through (1g) of the Inquiry's Terms of Reference.
2. As a Registered Industrial Organisation with industrial coverage of professional firefighters and other employees involved in fire and emergency response services in New South Wales, the FBEU is ideally placed on behalf of all members to provide valuable insight into, and recommendations arising from, the events of the major flooding events across NSW in 2022.
3. The 2022 floods were one of the most significant flooding events that the State of NSW has experienced. Often deemed as 'unprecedented' unfortunately, in recent years, we have seen major flooding events and other natural disasters including the 2019-20 bushfires which have very much set the precedent for large scale natural disasters and other emergencies.
4. These events are increasing in their frequency and intensity. Emergency Service Agencies and the NSW Government must no longer make excuses for gaps in preparation and response to disasters that are now a feature of the NSW landscape.
5. Climate science is now undeniable that events of this nature will continue. The NSW Government must resource our local combat agencies with the necessary training and resources to respond locally and in the timely manner that the community deserves.
6. During these events, two lives were lost, thousands of homes and business were destroyed, and tens of thousands of people were evacuated from their homes.
7. The FBEU sought direct feedback from our members regarding their deployment to these events and these submissions reflect the experiences of our members.
8. The FBEU has grave concerns regarding the resourcing and budget provided to Fire Rescue NSW (**FRNSW**). FBEU stands with our members, who's first-hand experience demonstrates an overwhelming need to be better equipped with the tools and training to tackle such unprecedented events and more importantly to be appropriately deployed and utilised as a key combat agency for flood response.

9. The protection of life, property and landscape is the core business of professional firefighters. As the representative body for all professional firefighters in NSW, be they permanent or retained firefighters, we recognise and treat this with the utmost seriousness.
10. It's time the NSW government treat these flooding events, with the same seriousness that FBEU and its members do.
11. FBEU members have described several failures in responding to these flooding events. This was not at the ineptitude of our members, or the front-line staff, but by decisions, lack of communication and governmental decisions set out by the NSW budgets and resources.
12. FBEU members were deeply frustrated by the impact of these floods and their ability to respond.
13. FBEU members are yet to experience the full impact of these flooding events, as we have yet to understand the full scope that this event has weighed on their mental and physical health.
14. The FBEU recognises that flooding and natural disasters is a national problem and impact our borders and economy. It is pivotal that lessons are learned from these floods, and not ignored.
15. Many FBEU members are disappointed that very little was learned from the 2017 and 2021 floods.
16. The FBEU urges this inquiry to consider the need for significant increases in funding in the areas described in this submission to ensure that upon another unfortunate flooding events will be fought with better resourcing and training.
17. The NSW government must treat the protection of life, property and landscape with as much seriousness as the FBEU and its members.

FIRE BRIGADES EMPLOYEES' UNION (FBEU)

18. The Fire Brigade Employees' Union of NSW is a trade union registered under the *Industrial Relations Act 1996* (NSW).
19. Formed in 1910, the FBEU is the most established and democratic firefighting organisation in NSW. The FBEU is Australia's oldest firefighting Union.
20. THE FBEU represents over 6000 professional firefighters including both permanent and retained firefighters in the largest fire and rescue service in Australia, FRNSW.
21. FBEU members work across metropolitan and regional areas and are involved in all manner of emergency response. NSW professional firefighters provide a range of emergency management activities including prevention/mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery. These activities include:
 - i. Responding to fire including structure, bushfires and car fires along with other emergencies.
 - ii. Assisting communities to prepare for bushfires and other hazards.
 - iii. Providing rescue services including:
 - i. Urban Search and Rescue.
 - ii. Technical Rope Rescue.
 - iii. Confined Space Rescue.
 - iv. Motor Vehicle Accident Rescue.
 - v. Rescue from Transport including trains, planes and ships;
 - vi. Industrial Rescue
 - vii. Domestic Rescue
 - viii. Swift Water Rescue.
 - ix. Alpine Rescue; and
 - x. HAZMAT rescue
 - iv. Managing hazardous material incidents including chemical, biological and radiological incidents.
 - v. Investigating fire cause and origin.
 - vi. Incident management.
22. Assisting other agencies.

23. The FBEU has prepared the submission based on individual responses and stories from our members and a collection of survey responses sent to members in April 2022.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The FBEU, on behalf of its members, will make the following nine recommendations in this submission:

- 1. FRNSW, and other professional agencies with trained operators, should be the designated lead combat agency for large scale emergency events.**
- 2. FRNSW must review its swift water rescue capability.**
- 3. The NSW Government must clarify the role of Resilience NSW for large scale emergency events.**
- 4. Resilience NSW must limit their role for large scale emergency events to preparation and long-term resourcing.**
- 5. The NSW Government must review the funding allocated to Resilience NSW to ensure appropriate funding goes across agencies involved in responding to such major emergency events.**
- 6. The NSW Government should appropriately fund and resource our State based combat agencies, in particular FRNSW.**
- 7. Public communication should rest with properly trained and confident professional combat agencies for major emergency events, i.e., FRNSW.**
- 8. The NSW Government must comprehensively review all reviews and recommendations of major emergency events in conjunction with current arrangements for emergency response in NSW, especially under the NSW EMPLAN.**
- 9. FRNSW is provided the necessary funding and resources to deliver additional land based and in-water rescue training to its professional firefighters increasing the number of trained operators to be deployed immediately.**

INQUIRY TERMS OF REFERENCE

(a) The preparation, coordination and response to the Western Sydney and north coast floods by the Government

24. The NSW Emergency Management Plan (**EMPLAN**) sets out the State's coordinated response to emergency management in NSW. It establishes the roles and responsibilities assigned to the States emergency response agencies in all phases of an emergency from preparation to response and recovery. In the case of flood, storms and tsunami events, the NSW State Emergency Service (**SES**) is currently the designated lead agency. The SES is a primarily volunteer agency which purports to have approximately 9000 volunteers¹ across the State.
25. There are inherent difficulties in a volunteer agency being the nominated lead. Unlike paid staff, volunteers are, by their nature an unreliable workforce. In emergency response where seconds can be the difference between life and death, or loss of property, it is vital that the initial response is active and ready to go, at all times.
26. It is not reasonable for the NSW Government to expect volunteers to perform in the same manner as a professional workforce. Professional firefighters are a workforce who are at the ready to respond seven days a week, 24 hours a day. FRNSW Senior Officers are trained specifically in incident management and response, equipping them with vital knowledge and skills to manage incidents of this nature.
27. At times, our Senior Officers on the ground experienced that the SES incident controllers were uncertain about the best and most appropriate action. This resulted in delays to the response and gave the entire response to these flooding events an air of uncertainty which filtered through to emergency responders on the ground.
28. FBEU members advised that they were often not utilised at all, delayed in responding in the field or under-utilised when ultimately sent. This led to confusion and a lacking response.

¹ New South Wales SES Website - <https://www.ses.nsw.gov.au/about-us/#:~:text=We%20are%20a%20volunteer%2Dbased,state%20that%20make%20this%20possible>

29. Incident management should follow 8 strategic functions: deployment, command, situation evaluation, incident action planning, incident communications, incident structure, review and revision, and escalation and de-escalation.²
30. The structure and capabilities within the incident management as set up for this event was not suitable. Training in incident management and provisions were completely lacking in the SES volunteers who were placed in charge of this event.
31. The Australasian Inter-Service Incident Management System (AIIMS) establishes the doctrine for events where multiple agencies are responding to do so via an integrated and effective response.
32. FRNSW has adopted an incident management plan consistent with the with the AIIMS doctrine and has trained necessary personnel AIIMS.
33. The key principles of AIIMS are:
- **Flexibility** – *the method must be able to be applied across all types of incidents, with an incident structure and plans that reflect the needs of the incident.*
 - **Management by objectives** – *for every incident a set of objectives must be identified, and a plan developed for managing those objectives. There can only be one set of objectives and one incident action plan.*
 - **Functional management** – *there are eight functional areas, or activates, that need to be managed – i.e., Control, Planning, Intelligence, Public Information, Operations, Investigation, Logistics and Finance. The Incident Commander is responsible for all functional areas but may choose to delegate one or more of the functions, depending upon the size and nature of the incident.*
 - **Unity of command** – *there must be only one Incident Commander; each individual must only report to one supervisor.*
 - **Span of control** – *an individual should only have 5 people reporting to them (optimal is 1:5 ratio), but this can vary between 1:3 to 1:7, depending upon the activity, geography, or nature of the incident.*³

² Incident management – Standard Operational Guideline, Version 43, September 2021, page 3

³ Incident management – Standard Operational Guideline, Version 43, September 2021, page 4

34. Many FBEU members described a lack of information about what they were being asked to do and/or what plan to follow. Information received was vague in nature. There was a lack of direction and at times it was unclear who in fact was in charge on the ground. When an incident controller could be identified, member reported that at times that person seemingly lacked the experience or training to be making relevant decisions regarding the response.⁴

35. For example, some FBEU members were guided with the following advice:

"...just told to drive around and see what we could find."⁵ "be visible."⁶

"Disaster assessment did not provide information about what we were looking for. Work appeared to be carried out significantly by homeowners."⁷

36. Members described a lot of waiting, being told to 'go find work.' Once they were done doing door knocking, for example, there would be another crew coming along to do the same thing.

"Very poor info from SES we had to door knock and collect data on a piece of paper in pouring rain or collect the data via a mobile phone app also in the pouring rain."⁸

"Out of approximately 100 addresses provided each day found very little work to be done. Most work was public relations and reassurance."⁹

37. As well as being under-utilised, the volunteer SES incident controllers at times lost control of the resources on the ground and were unable to understand the capability at their disposal and therefore call on that capability.

⁴ FBEU member survey

⁵ FBEU member survey

⁶ FBEU member survey

⁷ FBEU member survey

⁸ FBEU member survey

⁹ FBEU member survey

38. By way of example, FRNSW has a HAZMAT capability in key strategic locations along the NSW coast including Taree, Port Macquarie, Coffs Harbor, Newcastle, Grafton, Goonellabah and Tweed Heads. This HAZMAT capability consists of two trained operators on at any given time. These operators are all trained and licensed to pilot a small marine craft.
39. Despite this, FRNSW HAZMAT operators were not called upon in the initial phase of the response to ensure that each available boat, be it an SES or FRNSW was staffed and deployed.
40. Likewise, FRNSW Senior Officers are trained specifically in incident management therefore equipping them with vital skills that should have been deployed in the early hours and days of this incident. Despite this, Senior Officers have advised FBEU that they were not utilised to their full extent as a resource with examples given where SES deferred to the views of Surf Life Saving NSW, for example, instead of our trained Senior Officers with relevant local knowledge.
41. FRNSW also had shortcomings in their response. In particular, FRNSW Swift water rescue technicians. Swift water rescue technicians are vital in any flood response. Trained to meet the requirements of the State Rescue Board for in-water rescue, swiftwater rescue involves the rescue of people from moving water including stormwater, canals and creeks flood waters and rapids, rapids. Swift water rescue technicians are specially trained and equipped to enter water and perform these rescues entering the water to perform the rescue.
42. FRNSW Swift Water Rescue Technicians are however currently located only within metropolitan Sydney and not within regional areas or known flood prone areas of NSW.
43. Additionally, FRNSW has not invested in swift water rescue as it should, leading to our operators not being fully prepared to respond safely to these events.
44. In the early hours of the response, FRNSW swift water rescue technicians were contacting the FBEU advising that they did not have basic equipment to hand including wetsuits. Some operators advised that they had simply purchased their own wetsuits to not cause any unnecessary delay to their response.

45. Rescue operators were impeded by a lack of safe towing for boats. Images were shared with the FBEU which included response boats being tied down or strapped to the roofs of FRNSW vehicles as proper towing and launching vehicles were not readily available to respond.

RECOMMENDATION: *FBEU recommends that the designated lead combat agency for large scale emergency events of this nature be allocated only to professional agencies with trained operators ready to respond and officers trained in AIIMS. Volunteer based agencies, in particular SES should be designated as a support agency only.*

RECOMMENDATION: *In consultation with the FBEU, FRNSW must review its swift water rescue capability to ensure it is adequately trained and resourced to deploy quickly and safely to flood emergencies with the necessary tools and equipment to effect rescues in the timely manner the community deserves.*

(b) The role, composition and resource allocations of Resilience NSW, the NSW State emergency service and other relevant government agencies

46. FBEU repeats its above submissions regarding the role of the SES in relation to this aspect of the inquiry's terms of reference.
47. In addition, and, in relation to the role of Resilience NSW, FBEU members provided feedback questioning the role and utility of an agency such as Resilience NSW in events of this nature.
48. Resilience NSW was established in 2020 to coordinate emergency management policy and lead whole-of-government prevention, preparedness, and recovery efforts. Resilience NSW is therefore only intended to support combat agencies.¹⁰
49. FBEU members describe that despite Resilience NSW's defined responsibilities, staff from Resilience NSW attempted to insert themselves within the command structure in the emergency phase of the response and in particular, within the incident management structure.

¹⁰ Portfolio Committee No. 5 – Regional NSW and Stronger Communities, 6 April 2022, pg. 3

50. This created further confusion on the ground for our members given the lack of clarity on the role of Resilience NSW and the subsequent lack of training and skills of their employees to be involved in this stage of any response.
51. Resilience NSW is not an emergency response agency and does not perform a direct emergency response function nor sit within a command-and-control structure under the *State Emergency and Rescue Management Act 1989* (NSW) and therefore we assert had no direct role to play in the emergency phase of the response.
52. The attempts to be involved in the emergency phase added to the confusion and lack of coordinated leadership on the ground which ultimately led to the above events.
53. The FBEU is also concerned with the level of funding granted to Resilience NSW in circumstances where their role in these events remains unclear.
54. It has been reported public via media outlets that in the 2020/2021 financial year the total tax-payer expenditure on Resilience NSW was \$19.2 million with the agency comprising of 15 executive staff for a mere 105 total staff. This was an increase from the budget of the previous year for the equivalent organisation prior to its re-configuration into Resilience NSW who had an operating budget of \$7.4 million.¹¹
55. This is in stark contrast to FRNSW who, at the equivalent time, for an organisation of over 6000 operational employees, some 3000 volunteers and over 450 non-operational staff, had 7 members within their executive team.¹²

RECOMMENDATION: *FBEU recommends that the NSW Government clarify the role of Resilience NSW and limit it to preparation and long-term resourcing with no role to play in the emergency phase of the response.*

RECOMMENDATION: *FBEU seek a review of funding allocated to Resilience NSW to ensure appropriate and equitable distribution of funds across agencies involved in the response to major emergency events.*

¹¹ Daily Telegraph 'Resilience NSW spends triple predecessor's budget on executive salaries' 6 April 2022, Janet Fife-Yeomans and Lachlan Yeeming

¹² Fire and Rescue NSW, Annual Report 2020/2021

(c) coordination between the New South Wales Government, New South Wales government departments and agencies, the federal government, federal government departments and agencies, local governments, private sector operators and the community, including requests or offers of assistance

56. The FBEU and its members do not seek to directly comment regarding this aspect of the inquiry.

57. We do however note that the continued use of Australian Defence Force (**ADF**) to perform a function of the response in emergencies and natural disasters of this nature within Australia should be reconsidered.

58. While there is value in deploying the ADF to these events, the key role of the ADF as understood by us is to respond to outward threats as opposed to inward threats.

59. The FBEU maintains that the State Government should properly perform its function to ensure an appropriate level of funding and resourcing be allocated to the necessary combat agencies within NSW already in existence to respond to this known inward threats within NSW.

60. The FBEU maintains that the most appropriate agency to undertake this work is FRNSW as they have the capability and structures in place to deliver the required response functions in emergencies of this nature.

61. Likewise, as a State based agency, our resources are already located within NSW and within the local communities affected making the logistics of their deployment to these events generally more efficient and with necessary local knowledge.

62. FBEU members who live and work locally to the flood events reported through our survey that they felt under-utilised with a sense that they were not deployed for financial/budgetary reasons.¹³

RECOMMENDATION: *The FBEU recommends that the NSW Government reconsider their reliance on National and Interstate agencies. While recognising that these agencies can add value to the response, the NSW State Government's first priority should be to appropriately fund and resource our State based combat agencies and in particular FRNSW.*

¹³ FBEU member survey

(d) public communication, systems and strategies

63. The FBEU's comments on this aspect of the inquiry are limited as our members were not directly involved in the public communications during the events. FBEU members however who located within the Incident Management Team expressed concerns the public communication strategy and the management of the risk.

64. Members advised they felt SES volunteers were ill-equipped and lacked the necessary training, experience and ultimately confidence, to make major decisions of public communication, particularly in relation to evacuation orders. Members reported being in the emergency management meetings which contained senior local police command, FRNSW Superintendents and Local Council and Government management representatives all of whom are employed and trained to perform roles which involve the management of members of the public and public communication during emergency management however the decision making function rested with a volunteer member of the SES who does not perform this role in their day to day profession and therefore seemed overwhelmed at the responsibility placed on them.¹⁴

RECOMMENDATION: *Strategies regarding public communication and in particular major decisions such as the provision of evacuation orders should rest with a properly trained and confident professional combat agency, in our view FRNSW.*

(e) the implementation of recommendations from inquiries into previous natural disasters

65. There have now been numerous inquiries considering the effectiveness of the response to natural disasters in NSW.

66. FBEU and its members are disappointed that the learnings of previous inquiries have not resulted in direct changes on the ground in our response to events of this nature.

¹⁴ FBEU member survey

67. The FBEU wishes to make submissions regarding two recent inquiries which illustrate the failure of the NSW Government to properly consider and move to implement relevant recommendations.
68. The FBEU is concerned that at times, the reasoning behind failures to ensure reform in responses to natural disasters in NSW is guided by not just budgetary concerns, but also political considerations. There have been times the NSW Government has neither acted, nor responded to lessons learned from emergency response due to a fear of the political repercussions associated with criticising a government agency and in particular a volunteer workforce.
69. The FBEU and its members assert that this should not be a relevant consideration when it comes to emergency response and natural disasters. The community is not concerned with the name of the agency that is on the appliance that arrives to assist them in an emergency, they do not see the badge on the uniform, they simply require the most available and capable service to arrive and coordinate the response.
70. The NSW Government must not ignore the findings of previous inquiries, nor use inquiries as a tool to avoid accountability.
71. The Coronial Inquest into the fire at Reedy Swamp Tarraganda Bega/Tathra is one such example. The coroner issued their final report on this matter on 17 December 2021.¹⁵
72. This inquiry looked at the NSW Rural Fire Service which is the volunteer fire service in NSW. While the event itself is obviously different in nature being a bushfire event as opposed to a flood, the inquiry made recommendations from which lessons could have been learnt regarding relying on a volunteer response in major emergencies and in particular their capability to provide high level incident management support in these major events.
73. Recommendations of the Coroner from that inquiry included the following:
- i. That the NSW Rural Fire Service conduct a review of the training provided to personnel likely to occupy leadership roles within the Incident Management

¹⁵ Coroners Court of NSW, Into the fire at Reedy Swamp Tarraganda Bega/Tathra, Deputy State Coroner E Truscott, 17 December 2021

Team at the Bega Fire Control Centre to ensure that appropriate emphasis is placed on “worst case scenario planning”.¹⁶

- ii. That the NSW Rural Fire Service review the staffing arrangements applicable to the Bega Fire Control Centre to ensure that: the Incident Management Team includes:

- a. The Incident Management Team includes appropriate dedicated intelligence gathering personnel;
- b. Planning and intelligence officers be included in the pre-formed Incident Management Team on high bushfire risk days.

- iii. That the NSW Rural Fire Service review the roll-out of the AVL devices and associated software applications to ensure that fireground commanders are able to effectively discern the location of resources while in the field. This review should include a consideration of the implications of failures in mobile phone networks.

- iv. That the NSW Rural Fire Service and Fire and Rescue NSW jointly review the arrangements applicable to radio usage in relation to operations involving both NSW Rural Fire Service and Fire and Rescue NSW personnel to ensure that fire ground commanders are able to effectively communicate with, and provide directions to, members of other services.

- v. That the NSW Rural Fire Service and Fire and Rescue NSW review inter-agency training arrangements, to ensure that appropriate inter-agency practical exercises are conducted on a regular basis.

- vi. In the early stages of an incident or an IMT being formed, liaison officers from all fire-fighting agencies should be requested, and each agency should make reasonable endeavours, given operational demands and personnel.¹⁷

74. The FBEU submits that a key learning from the Inquiry was the need for trained personnel within any incident management structure for events of this nature in line with our described recommendations.

¹⁶ Coroners Court of NSW, Into the fire at Reedy Swamp Tarraganda Bega/Tathra, Deputy State Coroner E Truscott, 17 December 2021

¹⁷ Coroners Court of NSW, Into the fire at Reedy Swamp Tarraganda Bega/Tathra, Deputy State Coroner E Truscott, 17 December 2021

75. There is an inherent difficulty in having volunteers perform these functions. Volunteers by their nature are an unpredictable workforce with inherent constraints on their abilities to not only perform functions of this nature, to be able to commit the level of time and dedication required not just to be initially trained in necessary functions of emergency response and incident management, and to remain proficient in this area.
76. Professional firefighters maintain their proficiency through not just regular training, but also regular use of the skills gained. Their training and skills are used daily in responding to emergencies which allows them to hone their skills ensuring they are proficient, and therefore best placed to perform a lead role in any emergency response.
77. Volunteerism has also been on the decline across Australia in recent years. A 2016 report, State of Volunteering in Australia identified that 86 percent of volunteer organisations required additional volunteers and that Australia had seen a decline by 5% of the numbers of volunteers over the previous 5 years.¹⁸
78. In October 2021 the Australasian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council (AFAC) also published a review into the role of SES in the 2021 NSW flooding events.
79. This report has only recently been publicly released however the FBEU understands that SES and the NSW Government has had access to it since its publication.
80. The review affirms the FBEUs submissions. It found significant failings by the SES in relation to its response to large scale emergency events of this nature. The report concluded that:

“This event demonstrated that with the current structure of NSW SES staffing levels, and incident management skills of staff, it is very challenging for the service to be able to manage a number of concurrent high level incidents.”¹⁹

And recommended that:

¹⁸ State of Volunteering in Australia Report 2016, Price Waterhouse Coopers, p. xi and 2
<http://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/research-and-advocacy/publications/>

¹⁹ Australasian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council, *Independent Review into the 2021 NSW Flooding*, October 2021, p. 15

“NSW SES mature its approach to strategic resource management, including the use of internal (including volunteers for IMT roles), interagency and interstate resources.”²⁰

81. The FBEU has not had opportunity to fully consider the report’s findings yet. The FBEU only gained access to this report on the 16 May 2022 following a request by us under the *Government Information (Public Access) Act 2009*. It is glaringly obvious to the FBEU, given the deficiencies in the response to the flooding events which form the subject of this inquiry, that its findings and recommendations have not been acted on by the SES or the NSW Government.

RECOMMENDATION: *The FBEU recommends the NSW Government consider a comprehensive review encompassing all previous reviews and their recommendations of the current arrangements for emergency response in NSW with a particular focus on reviewing the arrangements under the NSW EMPLAN.*

(f) the overall effectiveness of the flood response

82. The FBEU rely on our submissions and recommendations above.

83. We also note that ultimately, as with all emergency response, the key to ensuring a safe and successful operation is ensuring you have sufficient trained operators with the skills and proficiency to perform the necessary tasks as required available and ready to response.

84. The ability to deploy proficiently trained personnel to any emergency response is a matter of resourcing. The FBEU accepts that the NSW Government must consider budgetary constraints and that resources are not unlimited. Given the continued experience of the communities of NSW when exposed to major natural disasters, there is simply not sufficient resourcing and personnel on the ground. The FBEU asserts that the NSW Government must provide additional resources in the form of

²⁰ Australasian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council, *Independent Review into the 2021 NSW Flooding*, October 2021, p. 18

personnel and training to ensure our emergency responders can get boots on the ground in these events.

85. FBEU reported to us that FRNSW simply did not have the necessary numbers of trained personnel available to respond to this event. Entire shifts had zero operators despite constant contacts and requests for training.²¹ Regional staff need to be trained, as they know their area and communities best. FFs and SOs need to be trained in swift water.^{22'}

“The disregard of training more swift water specialists regardless of rescue qualifications especially those near major waterways and wholly relying on volunteers to the brink, just to save a quick buck...”

“We were faced with people trapped in cars, we had no crews that had any flood training available and still had to do the rescues.”²³

86. Currently we understand that out of some 6369 field operational employees (firefighters) employed by FRNSW, approximately 520 are trained in land-based flood rescue. Likewise, only 109 have trained in in-water (swift water) rescue.
87. FRNSW firefighters are a uniquely placed workforce to deliver both land-based flood rescue and in water. With over 6000 professional firefighters across both the permeant and retained system, FRNSW has a large and proficiently trained workforce at the ready to response. Rescue is a core component of the work of firefighters, and they are well versed in requirements and challenges of emergency response and in particular, rescue.
88. The FBEU submits that there is an opportunity for NSW to increase its emergency capability quickly prior to our next flood season simply by providing the necessary resources to FRNSW to provide additional training to their current personnel in both land, and in water flood rescue, thus increasing our capability to responds.

²¹ FBEU member survey

²² FBEU member survey

²³ FBEU member survey

RECOMMENDATION: *FRNSW is provided the necessary funding and resources to deliver additional land based and in-water rescue training to its professional firefighters increasing the number of trained operators to be deployed immediately.*

(g) any other related matter.

89. FBEU members consistently provided feedback regarding their work health and safety whilst on deployment to these events.

90. The FBEU submits this information not as direct submissions regarding the efficacy or otherwise of the States response but to ensure that the health and safety of our first responders on the ground are kept front of mind in any such event and deficiencies be identified and considered by inquiry when considering the overall response.

91. FBEU members for example reported that they were consistently working in a very hot and humid climate in full personal protective clothing (**PPE**)/drill uniform. While members understand and advocate for the need to be properly attired in PPE in any event, minor changes could be considered such as the introduction of shorts into the cache of station wear uniform for firefighters to address overheating issues.

92. FBEU members also often reported becoming dehydrated. Drinks, such as water of Gatorade, were limited as it seems proper resourcing for first responder was not adequately addressed as part of the overall incident management. Amenities such as raincoats and toilets were often 'scoffed at.'²⁴

93. FBEU members described chemicals and other hazardous materials as a constant condition they were required to work around:

*"a lot of mould was present in homes and many various unmarked chemical substances were scattered around not to mention the risk of asbestos daily."*²⁵

94. There are risk assessments on recovery centres which were not properly addressed and caused distress/concern to FBEU members on the ground.

²⁴ FBEU member survey

²⁵ FBEU member survey

"We were approached by Representatives from Council regarding elderly residents having mould in their mobile homes and no assistance was going to be provided by Resilience NSW. Only a post copied from NSW Health on their Facebook page about how to deal with mould in your home."²⁶

95. Sleeping and accommodation arrangements were insufficient and did not account for appropriate safety measures considering the risks of COVID-19 transmission. FBEU members described a supply of a cot, sleeping bag and bath towel, and were required to bathe in a shower tent, with one member stating:

"I don't think the sleeping arrangements are suitable for rest for the work required."²⁷

96. When FBEU members had a moment to rest and/or relax from the physically demanding work they were doing, FRNSW did not want staff to leave the base camp:

"FRNSW tried to prevent us leaving the camp to attend a nearby tavern to have a meal, beer and watch the football off duty. We were threatened with disciplinary action."²⁸

97. There was not clear instruction to manage the risks of COVID-19 in this environment. This resulted in unnecessary exposure and risk to FBEU members and the impacted communities and increased confusion on the ground as employees were deployed then returned following repeated positive tests for COVID-19.

98. At one point a deployment of firefighters were exposed to and infected with COVID-19 while deployed resulting in a much larger group of first responders required to self-isolate again limiting the resources on the ground along with risking the health and safety of our members. FBEU members described little contact from FRNSW to check in on their health regarding their self-isolation and/or COVID-19 status.

²⁶ FBEU member survey

²⁷ FBEU member survey

²⁸ FBEU member survey

99. Given these various health and safety concerns the FBEU submits that matters relating to the health and safety of our first responders be a key consideration of all inquiries of this nature and provide an overarching lens to any findings or recommendations arising from this inquiry.

RECOMMENDATION: *Health and Safety of First Responders be a key consideration of all inquiries relating to the State's emergency response and provide an overarching lens to the findings and recommendations of this inquiry.*

CONCLUSION

99. The 2022 floods across NSW were a significant and disastrous flood.
100. Despite the many natural disasters and large-scale emergency events NSW has seen in recent years, the NSW Government was woefully unprepared for such a significant event.
101. The FBEU submits a vital component in improving our response to these events is to ensure professional emergency response agencies are properly funded, resourced and empowered to be the lead agency in these large-scale events.
102. While volunteers play a vital role in support, including providing a surge capacity of human resources on the ground, they are ultimately a volunteer workforce with no requirement to respond and without the resources, training, and capability to respond with speed and in the manner the community requires.
103. It is evident the NSW will undoubtedly see an increase in major disaster events in the coming years. If the Government does not act now, there will be an inevitable risk to loss of life in the affected communities along with continued loss of property, business and infrastructure.
104. The FBEU further submit that the NSW Government should reconsider the role of and funding allocated to Resilience NSW. Resilience NSW is not a combat agency and must not assert themselves when response to critical incidents is paramount. Resilience NSW's involvement during the emergency response phase to this event often proved a hindrance to protecting the community.

105. The FBEU will maintain that to ensure a protected community, FRNSW needs significant more funding, staffing, and training. Without a fully funded FRNSW, NSW will continue to see emergency disaster to be uncoordinated and inefficient, with a higher risk of loss of life.

106. Because of the above, the FBEU makes the following nine recommendations.

- 1. FBEU recommends that the designated lead combat agency for large scale emergency events of this nature be allocated only to professional agencies with trained operators ready to respond and officers trained in AIIMS. Volunteer based agencies, in particular SES should be designated as a support agency only.*
- 2. In consultation with the FBEU, FRNSW must review its swift water rescue capability to ensure it is adequately trained and resourced to deploy quickly and safely to flood emergencies with the necessary tools and equipment to effect rescues in the timely manner the community deserves.*
- 3. FBEU recommends that the NSW Government clarify the role of Resilience NSW and limit it to preparation and long-term resourcing with no role to play in the emergency phase of the response.*
- 4. FBEU seek a review of funding allocated to Resilience NSW to ensure appropriate and equitable distribution of funds across agencies involved in the response to major emergency events.*
- 5. The FBEU recommends that the NSW Government reconsider their reliance on National and Interstate agencies. While recognising that these agencies can add value to the response, the NSW State Government's first priority should be to appropriately fund and resource our State based combat agencies and in particular FRNSW.*
- 6. Strategies regarding public communication and in particular major decisions such as the provision of evacuation orders should rest with a properly trained and confident professional combat agency, in our view FRNSW.*
- 7. The FBEU recommends the NSW Government consider a comprehensive review encompassing all previous reviews and their recommendations of the current*

arrangements for emergency response in NSW with a particular focus on reviewing the arrangements under the NSW EMPLAN.

- 8. FRNSW is provided the necessary funding and resources to deliver additional land based and in-water rescue training to its professional firefighters increasing the number of trained operators to be deployed immediately.*
- 9. Health and Safety of First Responders be a key consideration of all inquiries relating to the State's emergency response and provide an overarching lens to the findings and recommendations of this inquiry.*

