



22 August 2023

State WHS Committee Members

By Email: stack.ki@bigpond.net.au

Response to Letter – WHS matters

Dear Committee Members,

Thank you for your recent letter raising concerns over work health and safety (WHS) matters. Firstly, I wish to address your lack of confidence in the staff and executive members that sit on the State WHS Committee (the committee).

Management / Executive Members on the State WHS Committee

I have full confidence in the staff that attend to the business of the committee and those that facilitate it through our regional and strategic operational functions. They have my full support and encouragement to try and steer a path, with your support, through the contemporary WHS issues that we face in our dynamic and resources constrained environment. A manifestation of my commitment to safety is the creation of our own WHS Unit. Whilst the Unit has only recently started operations it is having a direct impact on WHS issues within the SACFS. I hope that the WHS Unit can count on your full support which is critical to it achieving the aim of a safer operating environment for our volunteers and staff.

Support to the State WHS Committee

Secondly, regarding the loss of an Executive Officer and staff changes in that role in recent years. I acknowledge this concern however, there is little that can be done by SACFS about it. Ultimately, we are not in control of the career choices made by individuals. I encourage and facilitate the professional development of staff which means on occasion they leave the organisation for advancement or other opportunities. It is regretful this has impacted the role of the Executive Officer however, I hope the situation will stabilise as we have recently recruited a new Senior WHS Adviser (Adriana Brazil). Adriana will fulfil the role of Executive Officer over the coming months, she is an experienced WHS professional, I encourage you all to get to know her and share any concerns over the committee's business. I hope

that through our rapid recruitment of Adriana you can see how committed we are to ensuring continued support to this important committee.

Distress Signal Units

I acknowledge your concerns and those of others regarding the recent rollout of Distress Signal Units (DSU). Our Technical Operations Manager has spent considerable time testing, researching, and gathering further information about the issues raised. I am pleased to advise that we have released an operational bulletin to all SACFS members that, specifically addresses the concurrent issues. I encourage you to bring this bulletin to our volunteer's attention as we will be doing through our communications with them.

CFS Risk Register

I'm aware the former Chief Officer Mark Jones wrote to advise you that our current CFS register is a corporate level risk register. He highlighted that safety is one type of risk and that, there are other types of organisational risks that need management. Whilst this advice is correct there are some items on the register that capture WHS type risks. I'm aware our WHS Unit and the Deputy Chief Officer have discussed this matter recently. Consequently, we've taken the decision to share with you those WHS related risks on the SACFS corporate risk register.

I acknowledge your desire for a specific WHS operationally focused WHS risk register. However, I am not convinced this is necessary or desirable at this stage of the agency's maturity with our own WHS safety management system. It is our understanding there is not a specific requirement under the *Work, Health, and Safety Act 2012 (SA)* for us to have a risk register. Whilst there is need for improvement, I do believe our current system management system, when taken as a whole and based on our risk profile, is adequate to meet our needs. There may come a time when a specific operationally focused WHS risk register is appropriate and necessary however, there are other objectives I want us to achieve first.

First Aid

I acknowledge your view that our first aid risk assessment and extant procedures do not consider the specifics of advance bleeding control, or the potential risks posed by operating at night when dealing with a tree down incident. The current standard for CFS firefighters is the nationally recognised HLTAID003 Provide first aid course. Indeed, it is the benchmark first aid course for other volunteer services across Australia. SACFS also offers advanced resuscitation training which has been taken up by many of our members. These are industry standard courses in which many volunteers are trained by our contracted providers.

The current service level risk assessment was conducted in 2020 and later modified in 2021. The purposes of training our volunteers in first aid skills is articulated within the risk assessment, *“Providing immediate and effective first aid to employees or others who have been injured or become ill at the workplace may reduce the severity of the injury or illness”*. The primary purposes of our first aid training and the kits on our vehicles, is so that we can provide first aid to each other at a training or operational event. It remains the role of the South Australian Ambulance Service (SAAS) to be the primary provider of advanced emergency aid. There will of course be times that our crews arrive first or are responded to assist SAAS. In either case it remains that our role is one of providing incidental first aid only to the level we are trained and equipped to, until care of an injured person is taken over by SAAS crews.

In order that SACFS can consider whether our current arrangements for first aid are inadequate as you assert, I will have our staff contact SAAS to determine whether we can obtain quantitative data where SACFS crews have been involved in controlling major bleeding ahead of the arrival of SAAS crews. We will also attempt to seek SAAS opinion on the merits of SACFS RCR crews (and potentially other crews) being equipped and trained in the use of tourniquets etc. Noting that the management of bleeding through direct and indirect pressure is part of the current first aid course.

Furthermore, the Deputy Chief Officer has been in discussions with senior SAAS staff over dedicated training for SACFS crews called to assist SAAS. The finalised scope and nature of that training is being confirmed however, when it is, I ask that you engage with us and provide feedback. It may be that this training addresses your concerns over the inadequacy of first aid training.

Respiratory Protection Equipment

Given the length of my tenure as Chief Officer, I do not seek to account for the last nine years of discussion, as quoted in your letter. At your last committee meeting the WHS Unit was tasked with preparing written advice for the Chief Officer over information received from NSW Rural Fire Service, regarding their Respiratory Protection Equipment (RPE) study, and the implications for the use of enhanced RPE in SACFS. That advice has now been provided. It comes down firmly on the side of progressing towards enhanced RPE options for SACFS firefighters, but it is a move that comes with residual risks, as well as logistical and financial implications. It is also an enhancement that should be progressed incrementally and diligently so that we achieve the best outcome for our firefighters. I firmly support a move towards the supply of enhanced RPE to our workforce however, regrettably it is not presently within the financial resources available to us, this will be the subject of ongoing discussions with Government.

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The current issue of disposable P2 RPE remains suitable for light to moderate smoke conditions with P2 reusable RPE (with filters) being the extended option for moderate to heavy smoke conditions. My position is that where SACFS volunteers are faced with moderate to heavy smoke conditions, our fire ground commanders should consider the re-deployment of firefighters and/or others tactical options that match the capabilities of the issued P2 disposable RPE. I will request this control measure is emphasised to our workforce in our pre-season tactical briefings. I will keep you updated through the committee as to when resources become available to tackle this important equipment update.

I look forward to working with you on this.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'B. Loughlin', is centered on the page.

Brett Loughlin AFSM
Chief Officer
South Australian Country Fire Service