



SITREP 39/13

2013 Retained Award negotiations and the "availability" proposal

SITREP 32/2013 contained advice about a retainer/availability concept that the Union had developed, but had subsequently withdrawn. SITREP 34 followed with confirmation that IRC Vice-President Walton had reintroduced the concept as a focal point in the conciliation proceedings chaired by him. Put simply, the Judge wanted the proposal back on the table and directed both parties to thoroughly explore it. SITREP 39 is therefore part of this exercise, hopefully allowing members to better understand how and why the proposed payment of \$1.75 per hour of declared availability might replace two existing payments - (a) the fortnightly retainers and (b) kilometre payments for incidents.

The Union is unable to calculate the impact of the proposed change on individuals without knowing their distance from their station and their average attendances. What we do know is the number of retained staff at each station, the number of incidents attended by each station and the average number of firefighters attending per incident. Data for the 2011/12 year (the most recent full year data available) showed 245 stations with 3,351 retained staff attached, 51 of which were mixed and 194 of which were retained-only.

In order to calculate the impact of the proposed change on each station, we:

- 1) estimated the annual retainers paid by allowing for one Captain A (\$2,997 pa), one Deputy Captain A (\$2,701 pa) and the rest of the station on the Firefighter A retainer (\$1,539 pa);
- 2) estimated the annual incident kilometres paid by multiplying 6km (assuming an average distance of 3km between residences and the station) by the \$1.12 per km rate by the average number of firefighters attending per incident at each station by the total number of incidents attended by that station that year;
- 3) combined the two amounts at (1) and (2) above to arrive at an estimate of the annual combined retainer and incident kilometre payment for each station; and
- 4) divided the total combined payment at (3) by the total number of retained staff at the station and then divided that result by the proposed \$1.75 availability allowance and then divided that result by 52 in order to arrive at the average number of declared availability hours required per station member, per week, in order to equal their current average combined retainer/kilometre payments.

For example, at No. 345 Station Kempsey there were 20 retained members, 768 incidents and an average attendance of 5.3 members per incident. Our estimate methodology produced a combined retainer payment of \$34,063 pa and a combined kilometre payment of \$27,265 pa for a total retainer/kilometre payment of \$61,328 for the station, or \$3,066 per member. To earn that much from the \$1.75 per hour availability payment would require 1,752 hours of declared availability per year, or an average of 33.7 hours per week.

Our modelling of each station's data produced average availability requirements suggests that a significant majority of members would likely be financially better off under the proposal.

Availability per week required to equal current retainer and kilometre payments	Stations	Retained staff
less than 20 hours	0	0 (0%)
between 20 and 24 hours	108	1371 (40.9%)
between 24 and 36 hours	109	1560 (46.6%)
between 36 and 48 hours	21	327 (9.8%)
more than 48 hours	7	93 (2.8%)
Totals	245	3351 (100%)



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This is of course only modelling and is therefore only indicative of the actual impact of the proposal, which would be greater on those who lived further than 3km from the station or with higher than average attendance rates (who would require more availability hours to offset the loss of kms) and less on those who lived closer than 3km to the station, or with lower than average attendance (who would require fewer availability hours). Similarly, the benefit would be greater for lower call rate stations, again due to the lower incidence of km payment. The new system would also be more advantageous for firefighters than Captains and Deputy Captains, who currently enjoy higher retainers.

It is important to recognise that any availability declared in excess of the minimum required would translate to a direct increase in earnings. For example, our modelling shows that the 12 members at No. 258 Station Coledale would only need to declare an average of 20.43 hours per week of availability in order to match their current combined retainer/km payments. If, however, the minimum requirement of four was shared evenly so that each member declared availability for 56 hours each week (ie, 3 crews of four) then each member would receive an extra \$63 per week (36 hours x \$1.75), or an extra \$3,276 per year.

While that still leaves a final 28 stations and 420 (12.4%) firefighters who would need to average more than 36 hours availability each week in order to match their current combined retainer/km payment, these particular payments constitute a far smaller percentage of their total FRNSW earnings than is the case for the majority of retained firefighters at stations with lower call rates.

For example, the average call rate for those 28 stations is 816 incidents per annum. The average call rate for the remaining 217 stations is 188 incidents per annum. A Deputy Captain in the high call rate group who attends 50% of all 816 calls that year for (say) one hour or less each call would be paid \$12,113 (\$29.69 x 408 hours). By contrast, a Deputy Captain in the lower call group who attends 50% of all 188 calls that year would be paid \$2,790 (\$29.69 x 94 hours).

The higher rate of pay for the first Deputy Captain rightly compensates that member for the greater amount of work actually performed, and this would not change under the proposed availability payment. What the current arrangements do not recognise or reward is the burden of availability, which is the same for a low call rate station as it is for a high call rate station.

The difference is that the firefighter at the busier station who makes themselves available has a far greater chance of having that availability rewarded than the firefighter who makes themselves available at the quieter station. The proposed availability payment would redress this imbalance and, our modelling suggests, leave the very great majority of retained firefighters and Union members financially better off.

The Union's award application next returns to the IRC on 31 October. In the meantime, members are again encouraged to consider and discuss the availability payment proposal, and to consider how it might impact upon your own situation and that of your station (the data for which is available on request). We will continue to answer suggestions or questions submitted via email or fax to the Union office.

Jim Casey
State Secretary

Friday 11 October 2013