



## Keelty's Tathra review

### Key points:

- **Turf wars confirmed**  
*"members of both fire organisations are often critical of each other with the animosity at times, palpable."*
- **RFS and Berejiklian Government cleared of any fault**  
*"The decision to refuse FRNSW offers of assistance had no impact on the outcome of the incident,"*
- **Finger pointed instead at FRNSW comms**  
*"the power imbalance of one agency managing call taking for both agencies is the nub of the problem,"*
- **Which Keelty recommends should be taken off FRNSW and 'civilianised'**  
*"Such a centre should be managed by either a non uniformed public servant staffed organisation" and while this is being implemented "FRNSW should take steps to civilianise ComCen".*

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The Keelty review into the Tathra disaster that was commissioned by the Minister for Police and Emergency Services following media reports that the RFS had refused FRNSW offers of assistance has now been released, together with the Government's response. Both can be found as links from the online version of this SitRep.

Unfortunately, Mr Keelty has delivered a simplistic Review that takes aim at the messengers (FRNSW ComCens) rather than the core problem, being the petty parochialism that caused the RFS to reject FRNSW's offers of assistance. His solution? To eventually take all call taking and dispatch off FRNSW. In the meantime, he also recommends that FRNSW management *"take steps to civilianise ComCen"* without explaining why.

The observation on Page 13 that *"the NSW Police Force operates civilianised call and dispatch centres and has done so for many years"* and a reference on Page 18 to (presumably RFS) interviews about *"a perceived power imbalance in favour of FRNSW who take all calls of all fire events in NSW and then decide whether or not to refer the incident to the RFS"* are the closest the Review comes to explaining why 100 FBEU members should now lose their jobs.

The Review is critical of those who revealed RFS response problems: *"From the outset of the Review it became clear that staff within FRNSW had been building a dossier of incidents where it is claimed the RFS had not responded appropriately to some 110 fires across the State,"* [Page 11]. It was this data (from western Sydney, not "across the state") that led to the unprecedented "Sloths to a flame" Daily Telegraph front page exposé on Friday 23 March that embarrassed RFS head office and the Minister, who now appears determined to deny FRNSW access to RFS call and response data in order to minimise the risk of his Government ever being embarrassed like that again. When faced with the problem of RFS failure, the solution is not to fix the RFS but to remove those who can see the problem.

While Mr Keelty recommends transferring his new ComCen to the RFS (*"The Review was informed of a future move of the RFS communications centre to new premises. This is an excellent opportunity to rebadge the new centre ..."* [Page 14]), and consequently the perceptions of ComCen bias from one service to the other, it is his recommendation about civilianisation and replacing FRNSW operators (and FBEU members) with somebody – anybody – else that really gives the game away. The new and "independent" ComCen contemplated by Mr Keelty would collect and have access to all of the call and response times and data for both FRNSW and the RFS, but FRNSW would in future have access to only its own information. Ironically, the RFS will cease to be



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subject to objective, independent review or accountability at the precise point in time when it is on the verge of becoming transparently so owing to Automatic Vehicle Location (AVL).

The Union has been pressing for the rollout of AVL to all RFS units for firefighter and community safety at the Fire Services Joint Standing Committee (FSJSC) for several years now. Every time AVL was raised, RFS management found an excuse to say why it couldn't happen, or at least not happen yet, so we welcome Mr Keelty's unambiguous Recommendation 6 that the Government "*As a matter of priority commence the roll out of AVL capability for the RFS fleet, completing as much work as possible before the 2018/19 bush re season*". However, we also see a direct connection with Recommendations 7 and 9 to strip the ComCens from FRNSW.

The reason that RFS management avoided being pinned down for so long on the no-brainer that is AVL is the same reason that Mr Keelty is recommending the eventual scrapping and immediate civilianisation of FRNSW comms – their fear of independent and objective scrutiny of RFS response times. They simply do not want the public to know what is actually going on and by removing comms they think they can keep the horror stories of slow responses, or non-responses, under wraps.

AVL aside, the other big reform that gets an FBEU tick (albeit qualified) are the Review's Recommendations 2, 4 and 8 and their intention to respond the quickest and most appropriate resource to a fire incident, regardless of jurisdictional boundaries. We were supportive of the quickest response in our discussions with Mr Keelty, but warned him against the second "and most appropriate" criteria. While the quickest truck to an incident will usually be an objective, matter of fact answer, adding the very subjective "most appropriate" part only sets up the two services for future brawls.

Turning to the rest of the Review, it was disappointing to see Mr Keelty continue to peddle the "*the relationship between FRNSW and the RFS at the executive level is excellent*" nonsense. It isn't. The services remain in outright competition with each other, and you need look no further for evidence of this than the decision by FRNSW management to blow millions that it doesn't have on a re-branding exercise to better position FRNSW against the RFS in the "marketplace" that is NSW. It might be funny if it wasn't so serious.

The Review's Finding 3 that the RFS' refusal of repeated offers of assistance "*had no impact on the outcome of the incident*" not only defies logic, it also contradicts another point within the same finding that "*FRNSW ComCen overruled the decision of the RFS District Duty Officer and deployed to the Bega Valley fires without being called out, but as it happened this was very useful for the overall protection of homes*". The Review appears to want it both ways by claiming that FRNSW couldn't have made a difference anyway, except for the few units that were sent that actually made a difference?!

In closing, the Union will have a lot more to say about the Review and the Government's response to it (which another Sitrep will focus on) over the coming weeks but for now members should know that it is only a review, and far from a "done deal". If we're to be honest it was not exactly an independent review, either. The Minister hired a consultant to give him and his Government the findings and recommendations they wanted, and the consultant delivered. Which is hardly surprising. It's an unwritten rule of politics that you never ask a question if you don't already know the answer. This Review was no different.

**Leighton Drury**  
State Secretary