



Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee

Parliament House Canberra, ACT 2600

Date: 27 February 2025

Subject: Response to Senate Inquiry into the National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army)

Dear Senate Committee Members,

On behalf of the South Australian Country Fire Service (SACFS), I wish to thank the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee for the opportunity to provide feedback on the National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army).

We acknowledge the intention of the Scheme to strengthen Australia's volunteer capacity in disaster response and community resilience.

We have consulted with our staff and volunteers, and bring to your attention, a number of critical considerations that have been identified. We welcome further clarification and refinement.

Definition and Scope of a Volunteer

- ☐ There is a lack of clarity regarding whether the Scheme is intended to include spontaneous volunteers or if it is restricted to members of recognised organisations.
- ☐ A clear definition is essential to align the Scheme with existing emergency service models and avoid governance complexities.

Alignment with Existing Emergency Services

- ☐ Concerns were raised that the Scheme, rather than strengthening existing volunteer agencies, may create parallel structures that could compete for resources and engagement.
- ☐ A focus on reinforcing current emergency service organisations rather than establishing new governance models is recommended.

Volunteer Recruitment and Retention Challenges

- ☐ Our stakeholders highlighted challenges in maintaining volunteer engagement, including an ageing volunteer base, workplace barriers,

and a shift in community ownership due to increasing bureaucratic structures.

- Efforts to re-engage volunteers must address both motivational and structural barriers to ensure long-term sustainability.

Financial Incentives and Compensation

- While financial incentives may reduce barriers to participation (such as covering lost wages or training costs), there is concern that monetary rewards could undermine the intrinsic motivations that drive volunteerism.
- Any compensation model should be carefully structured to support, rather than replace, traditional volunteer engagement motivations.

Nationally Recognised Qualifications

- There is broad support for the development of nationally recognised and transferable qualifications that reflect the skills and expertise of volunteers.
- These should go beyond academic credits and provide tangible career or skills-based benefits across jurisdictions.

Community Resilience and Early Engagement

- SACFS supports the concept of fostering volunteerism from an early age, as demonstrated by international models such as those in Germany.
- Integrating emergency service education into school curricula may provide long-term sustainability for volunteer programs.

Governance, Laws, and Cross-State Consistency

- Governance duplication and inconsistencies in volunteer regulations across states were identified as significant barriers.
- A nationally consistent framework, particularly for interstate volunteer deployments, is crucial to ensuring the Scheme's effectiveness.

Employer and Stakeholder Contributions

- The role of employers in supporting volunteer participation should not be overlooked. Workplace flexibility, employer incentives, and collaboration with non-profits and private sector organisations could enhance volunteer engagement without excessive financial burdens on individuals.

Conclusion

The SACFS recognises the intent of the National Volunteer Incentive Scheme to enhance disaster response capabilities and volunteer participation.

However, given the concerns raised during our consultation process, we strongly recommend:

- ☐ Further refinement of the Scheme's governance structure to integrate with existing emergency services.
- ☐ A balanced approach to volunteer incentives that preserves the spirit of volunteerism while addressing barriers to participation.
- ☐ Increased focus on early engagement strategies to build long-term volunteer commitment.
- ☐ Establishment of a nationally consistent framework for qualifications and regulatory requirements.
- ☐ Employer and workplace integration strategies to facilitate volunteer participation.

We welcome the opportunity to engage further with the Committee to ensure that the Scheme delivers meaningful benefits without unintended consequences for the emergency services sector.

Yours sincerely,

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Chief Officer

South Australian Country Fire Service