

Wednesday 12 November 2014 - Number 600

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Current National Security Alert Level: **High**

GENERAL

Embracing diversity with the Hon Michael Kirby

Last Wednesday, we were extremely privileged to have the company of the Hon Michael Kirby AC CMG at City of Sydney Fire Station. As Australia's longest serving High Court judge and an activist for diversity and international human rights, Justice Kirby has had a fascinating career. The high esteem in which he is held in the community was reflected in the number of staff who took the time to hear him talk. Speaking with humility and humour, Justice Kirby shared his personal experiences of discrimination and told of the importance of an equitable society and encouraging people to speak up. He particularly made the point that bullying, harassment and discrimination can flourish where people fail to speak up and send the message that it will not be tolerated. In a first for FRNSW, the talk was streamed live via FireCAM. If you missed it, a [video is available on the intranet](#).

Winners of Commissioner's Safety Awards

I'm pleased to announce that Bangalow Deputy Captain Mellissa Madden was the overall winner of the inaugural FRNSW Commissioner's Safety Awards in recognition of her work and leadership in supporting fellow firefighters during and after traumatic incidents as a member of our critical incident team. The awards were a great success with four category winners announced from the 65 FRNSW employees nominated for their outstanding safety initiatives and leadership.

Congratulations to all the winners, finalists and nominees. The quality and diversity of the nominations demonstrates the level of commitment and innovative thinking aimed at improving safety, which I encourage all FRNSW staff to emulate. I look forward to next year's Commissioners Safety Awards when we will have the opportunity to recognise even more of the outstanding people who make an effort every day to make our work safer. To see the full list of winners and their achievements, please see the [intranet story](#).

Managing staff with mental illness

Mental illness is more common than many people realise. Around 45% of Australians experience mental illness at some point in their life. If you are a supervisor, at times you will likely need to manage staff with mental illness. Most workers successfully manage their illness without it affecting their work. Some may require workplace support for a short period of time, while a minority will require ongoing workplace strategies.

To assist you, we have arranged for the [Mindful Employer program](#) developed by SANE Australia to be made available internally to everybody who have the responsibility of managing staff. We have also launched a new section in the Mental Health Toolkits to address [Managing Staff](#). In addition, the [Manager Assist](#) program delivered by our Employee Assistance Program provides confidential coaching and advice to supervisors on how to support staff who are having difficulties.

Keeping safe at incidents involving asbestos

This November is Asbestos Awareness Month, so it is a good time for all of us to update our knowledge on measures to keep firefighters safe at incidents where asbestos is present. We have relaunched an updated asbestos awareness training module, which can be found in the [Hazmat toolkit](#). The module identifies where asbestos is commonly found, and describes correct procedures to be followed at incidents involving asbestos.

We recently commissioned an independent assessment of our processes when responding to incidents where asbestos is present. Our Work Health and Safety Advisory Committee will oversee implementation of the report's recommendations in coming months. We are also investigating the use of bonding agents for asbestos found at emergency incidents, with a view to trialling kits in the near future.

Commissioner's Participative Council members chosen

We had an overwhelming response to my invitation to all staff to apply to join the Commissioner's Participative Council. I'm not at all surprised that so many of you are keen to help shape the future of FRNSW. After considering all 126 applications received, I have chosen 25 members based on the quality of people's applications and their demonstrated commitment to innovation and change. It was a difficult choice, and I wish that we could simply have a council with 126 members – but alas, this would be too unwieldy. The council membership is made up of a cross representation of staff, with those selected representing our rank and grade structures, our multiple locations and the diversity of our workforce. I have asked A/Assistant Commissioner Gerry Byrne to chair the council. Gerry welcomes the opportunity to work with council members over the next 12 months to identify roadblocks and ensure that good ideas reach the right people who can take action.

I have emailed all applicants advising them of the outcome. Successful applicants have been invited to a training day on Tuesday 18 November. Details of members will be posted to the Intranet later this month so that you know who is on the council and can pass on your ideas to them. I'm inviting everybody to play an active role in the future of FRNSW. Whether people have been a part of FRNSW for 30 days or 30 minutes, you and your ideas are all equally important.

***Firies* – how we're rating**

With *Firies* now more than halfway through its eight episode run, the viewer ratings are looking very good. After the first episode was watched by 645,000 viewers, ratings were up to 1.74 million by week four. The series has generated hundreds of comments, shares and more than 1,000 likes on social media. A recent 'Ask the *Firies*' competition on Facebook encouraged the public to put forward their burning questions with training and call outs proving to be popular subjects. This week in episode six, a kitchen fire breaks out in a high-rise building, crews work to release victims trapped at an MVA and crews tackle a fire in a factory hopper. Tune in on Network Ten at 6pm on Saturday.

Sick leave updates on the intranet

I continue to receive queries about sick leave trends, how our budget is travelling, and what effect sick leave has on levels of overtime. To help answer some of these questions and keep staff informed, a sick leave dial and supporting graphs have been reintroduced on our intranet home page. These provide a snapshot of how we are tracking against our target of 87 hours per firefighter per year (the jointly agreed 2008 Permanent Firefighter Award target). You can "dive" into the data and review sick leave graphs for each Directorate, Area and Zone Command, as well as individual stations. Another dial showing overtime hours against budget is also being developed.

While sick leave is not the only driver of overtime, it is a big contributor and one over which we have some control. Average sick leave has declined modestly over the last couple of years, and I thank all staff for their efforts on this. Whilst we are still a long way from achieving the target, sick leave will always be available for its legitimate purpose – none of the strategies in place should be misconstrued as suggesting that you should come to work when you are genuinely sick. That having been said, it is in all of our interests to meet sick leave and overtime targets, as well as working on issues such as retained firefighter shortages and unavailability, as this will enable us to meet budget requirements without further measures.

Captain Mervyn Reed retires after 45 years

On Saturday 1 November, I attended the farewell function for Tocumwal Captain Merv Reed AFSM who is retiring after 45 years of dedicated service as a retained firefighter in his local area. Merv was involved in setting up the Community First Responder program in Tocumwal, and has personally contributed to enhancing

the firefighting skills of numerous retained firefighters across NSW through his support, together with wife Rosemary, of the Firefighter Championships. He also coordinated the Royal Children's Hospital Good Friday Appeal for many years. I thank Merv and Rosemary for their many years of service and commitment to the Tootumwal community and FRNSW, and wish them all the best in a well-deserved retirement.

Firefighters' first aid efforts recognised

On 25 October Qualified Firefighter George Cheeke and Senior Firefighter Lloyd Mulder, both from 25 Mosman, received a Save A Life Award from St John Ambulance NSW. This award was given in recognition of their efforts last year when they responded to a fuel tanker which had overturned and caught fire at Mona Vale. In conditions of extreme radiant heat and heavy smoke they rendered first aid to a casualty who had suffered 100% percent burns to his body and was suffering severe smoke inhalation. I congratulate both firefighters on this further recognition of their courageous actions in tragic circumstances.

Commemorating Remembrance Day

Remembrance Day, 11 November, marks the anniversary of the armistice which ended the First World War (1914-18) and commemorates the loss of Australian lives in all wars, conflicts and peacekeeping operations. Yesterday I joined senior representatives from the defence forces, RSL, other emergency services, charities, religious groups and politics in laying a wreath at the Remembrance Day service held at the Cenotaph, Martin Place, Sydney. FRNSW fire stations flew the Australian and NSW flags at half mast on the day to remember the sacrifice of all those who have died for Australia.

National Medal and FRNSW Long Service and Good Conduct Medals

A review has been conducted of the National Medal and FRNSW Long Service and Good Conduct Medal nomination and distribution process. The nomination process for both these medals will occur at six month intervals, in January and July of each year, for eligible service falling in the previous six month period. This is generally an automatic process using personnel records, however claims for medals using eligible service in other agencies need to be submitted to Office of the Commissioner.

National Medals and Clasps due between 1 January 2014 and 30 June 2014 have arrived at Head Office for distribution. Letters will be sent out to recipients' home addresses early next week advising of the award and requesting the recipient to select and respond with a presentation option.

FRNSW Long Service and Good Conduct Medals and Clasps due between 1 January 2013 and 30 June 2014 have also arrived at Head Office for distribution. LSGC medals are currently being checked, sorted, bundled and distributed. They are expected to be delivered to the relevant Zone Office or Directorate for local distribution in early December this year.

Congratulations and thank you to all recipients for your long and valued service.

INCIDENTS

Firefighters battle inferno at north coast timber mill

At 1019 hours on Wednesday 5 November 306 Grafton and 307 South Grafton responded to what was originally reported to be a large bushfire at Junction Hill on the outskirts of Grafton. On arrival, they discovered that the incident was a fierce blaze burning inside a large 3-storey 100m x 150m timber mill of iron and sheet metal construction. The RFS was informed and urgently respond tankers.

The fire was generating large volumes of smoke. Hazards on site included hydraulic oil boiling in tanks and causing explosions, gas from welding works, a boiler which was at risk of failure and a roof collapse in the rear area. There were also problems securing water for all appliances; the assistance of the RFS proved to be crucial to the outcome, securing water and containing exposures. Around 50 workers were evacuated for safety. A defensive attack was established from the outset, and despite the very challenging conditions, firefighters eventually managed to contain the fire to the rear half of the building. 507 Woolgoolga and 362 Lismore also responded to assist, with Police and Ambulance also in attendance.

By 1219 hours crews had the fire under control but various hot spots remained. By 1337 hours the fire was all but extinguished and crews concentrated on mopping up and overhaul. One firefighter suffered heat stress and was taken to hospital for observation but was later released. Information supplied by mill staff was crucial in helping fire crews understand what was happening inside the burning building and minimising the damage.

This incident was one of the largest and most challenging experienced in the area in recent times. The Stop message was sent at 1629 hours. The mill and its contents were 30% destroyed by fire but surrounding building exposures were protected. HT306 remained on-scene for a short time after to clean up a small amount of oil which had entered a roadside drain. The mill is already back into part operation and will be back to 60% production by next week which is very important to the economy of the local area. Well done to all attending crews for saving 70% of the structure.

Katoomba bushfire emergency

On Saturday 1 November, 20 crews from across the Blue Mountains and Sydney worked with a similar number of RFS crews, National Parks firefighters and aircraft at the scene of a bushfire on Cliff Drive, Katoomba. After initially responding at 0819 hours and working with aircraft to extinguish fires along the walking track and in the valley, FRNSW crews were released by the RFS as remaining fire was remote from roads. At 1557 hours, the RFS requested urgent FRNSW assistance as very strong winds had fanned the blaze up the escarpment to Cliff Drive where it was again threatening properties. Crews joined numerous RFS appliances already on scene with the fire rapidly coming up the valley on the northern side of the earlier fire. Winds were gusting directly from the west pushing the flames towards houses on Cliff Drive. At one stage flames were 15–20 metres high with visibility virtually zero. With flames leaping over the road, both property and appliances were in danger. One house was lost and only minor damage to one of the neighbouring houses. A Strike Team was organised to patrol the area overnight to be on the lookout for further outbreaks.

Kurri Kurri bushfire

On Sunday 2 November, eighteen FRNSW crews were deployed to assist the RFS at a large bushfire at Hospital Road, Kurri Kurri. The fire, which was started by a lightning strike the night before, began to pose a threat to nearby properties after the wind changed to a fresh southeasterly late in the afternoon. FRNSW supported the RFS in providing property protection at the rear of Kurri Kurri Hospital and for houses in Pelaw Main. The firefighting effort included three NSW RFS helicopters, backburning and sections of direct attack.

ASK THE COMMISSIONER

Q. Does FRNSW have any policy/procedures for assisting the NSW Health Service in relation to ebola like symptoms? Would we ever be asked to assist in a Hazmat/CBR capacity as has happened with fire services in the United States?

A. Yes, but any role we would potentially play will be very limited. Officers from Hazmat Capability have been meeting with NSW Health to discuss any FRNSW response to assist with an incident involving Ebola. NSW Health is the combat agency for any viral outbreak, and have a plan including decontamination procedures to deal with any such cases. NSW Health has engaged contracted Police Forensic cleaners to deal with bodily fluid spills of potential Ebola patients. The majority of these incidents would be expected to occur in a health care setting.

It is possible that an out of hospital setting involving ambulance personnel could occur, which could trigger a Hazmat response by FRNSW. We have been reviewing our SOGs and current practices along with our Scientific Officer, and see no need to alter our procedures from our current procedure for a biological incident. FRNSW continues to engage in meetings with NSW Health and nationally via AFAC to discuss the Ebola situation, to share information and ensure a best practice response from FRNSW. We have also been working closely with the Victorian Fire & Emergency Service Commissioner's Office, and sourced materials from the International Association of Fire Chiefs in the USA.

Please note that while Ebola is obviously a very serious disease, it is not highly contagious. It cannot be transmitted airborne (coughing, sneezing), it is not infectious during incubation, and can only be caught through contact with bodily fluids after symptoms become obvious. Widespread transmission of any cases in Australia would be unlikely due to world's best practice infection control in Australian hospitals, effective public health responses, and the absence of certain cultural practices that can promote spread such as contact with bodies of the deceased during traditional burial ceremonies. More information is available on the NSW Health Ebola website: <http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/Infectious/alerts/Pages/EVD.aspx>

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