



OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR
VICTORIA

AUSTRALASIAN FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICE AUTHORITY COUNCIL CONFERENCE

Wednesday 28th August 2019

Commissioner Steve Warrington, Chair, AFAC19 Conference Steering Committee

Commissioner Paul Baxter, AFAC President and Commissioner of Fire and Rescue NSW

Dr Katherine Woodthorpe AO, Chair, Bushfire and Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre

Mr Bruce Varner, International President, Institution of Fire Engineers

All Heads of Member Agencies

Distinguished guests

Ladies and gentlemen

First, I thank Uncle Bill for his warm Welcome to Country and acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land upon which we are gathering and pay my respects to their Elders past and present and to the Elders here with us this morning.

I am delighted to be here to open the 2019 Australasian Fire and Emergency Service Authority Council (AFAC) Conference.

When I am fortunate enough to open major conferences here – such as this one – I am struck by several things.

The first is an immediate understanding as to why Melbourne has been chosen as the conference venue. I think it reflects the wide-ranging expertise that resides here, as well as a sensible desire to capitalise on the fun that our city provides.

If that sounds like a particularly biased perspective, I hope that you will forgive the Governor of Victoria for that! I do admit to some bias, but I would argue it is based on fact, not just affection.

At the same time, I am struck by the extraordinary talent and expertise that a conference like this brings from elsewhere. It seems to me that nothing can lift the bar higher or faster in any discipline than having the best minds and the broadest experience brought together, and given the time and the space in which to share ideas.

And, quite seriously, I am conscious that although you all hail from other beautiful cities or centres, as well as meeting here at the Conference Centre, you can use the cafes, bars, restaurants, laneways and gardens of Melbourne, as well as the natural beauty of a little further afield, as a backdrop for free-flowing discussions between you. They are always just as important as the formal conference agenda.

There is however another thing that I am often struck by when I come to open an important conference and exhibition. It is just how ill-equipped I am to deal with the detail of the expert areas that people gather here to discuss.

This event is an excellent case in point.

It will be Australasia's largest and most comprehensive emergency management conference and exhibition, dealing with complex issues such as Fire Behaviour and Impact; Climate Change; Community Preparedness; Predictive Services; Communications; Capability; Resilience and Recovery; Risk, Economics and Policy and Health and Wellbeing.

There are several areas though upon which I do feel confident to make some comment.

The first arises directly from my role as the Patron of the Victorian Bushfires 10th anniversary commemorations earlier this year. It took me to most of the affected areas of our State, and brought me into contact with a wide range of our emergency services personnel.

I was struck by the calibre of people involved, and the huge range of skills across every part of the emergency services sector: those who worked in fire mitigation, frontline fire fighters, all those in support roles, and the many who worked in the aftermath.

Since that time, there have been advances in fuel control, bushfire readiness and protocols, service coordination and communications, but they have taken nothing away from the courage of those who fought the fires, including those from outside Victoria who stepped in to help.

We saw the toll of such a major disaster. The toll on life, the toll on livestock, on flora and fauna and crops and homes and towns.

And the psychological toll on those directly and indirectly affected, including those who see so much that is hard to see, and hear stories that, when repeated over and over again, in themselves can trigger trauma.

I am pleased to see the inclusion of Health and Well-being in the conference program.

The other area of your work upon which I feel equipped to at least make a comment, is on the topic of 'Change', the chosen theme of your conference this year.

I just want to applaud your broad interpretation of this theme, whereby you will deal with:

- changing culture, including diversity and inclusion,
- changing communities, including the urban sprawl, an ageing community and declines in volunteering,
- a changing world, which of course includes changing climate and rapidly changing technology, and
- changing your practices with the use of, big data, innovation and new ways of human resource management.

That your organisers have been prepared to create such a challenging agenda, and that over 3,000 of you are attending to rise to the challenge, can give us all confidence of the insight and the commitment you bring to your roles.

I thank you for the courage you demonstrate in your work, and the equal courage that you show in seeking continuing change and improvement.

As more than 9 million Australians have been impacted by a natural disaster or extreme weather event in the past 30 years, and the frequency and severity of many hazards are predicted to increase, your contributions are more important than ever.

I congratulate all those connected with the organisation of this conference.

I wish you all a productive, collaborative and successful time here.

And I am pleased to announce this conference officially open.