Volunteers sound

FRUSTRATED: Mike Pearce and Rainer Kiessling in front of a 1982 tanker truck

Ageing equipment and empty coffers risking lives, CFS warns

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CLAPPED-OUT fire trucks and dilapidated equipment are hampering cash-strapped Country Fire Service volunteers, who warn Adelaide Hills communities may be at risk if a Black Saturday disaster strikes South Australia.

The frustrated CFS stalwarts say if their repeated calls for more money and resources are not met, they plan to publicise their plight by driving their ageing vehicles to Parliament House.

One long-time volunteer promised to "park them in front of Parliament House and throw the keys in the gutter".

CFS chiefs admit the state's numerous brigades and groups receive only a tenth of the CFS's giant $56 million annual budget to manage day-to-day needs, but maintain the level of funding is sufficient.

However, a group of the state's top CFS officers and volunteers believe their firefighting capabilities are being compromised, telling the *Sunday Mail*:

CONCERN: Ken Schutz ... CFS needs to be better funded

SIXTY firefighting vehicles are due for replacement within five years, at a cost of $8 million – but will not be funded by CFS headquarters because they were provided by local brigades.

VOLUNTEERS are forced into continuous fundraising, such as holding sausage sizzles, to pay for basic equipment including new firehose nozzles and chainsaws.

ONE Stuarts Range station has essential equipment kept behind shed doors so old they take up to five minutes to open in an emergency. The building is infested with white ants.

VOLUNTEERS lack training in how to fight building fires, and respond to crash rescues and other hazardous incidents.

The CFS Volunteers Association says the safety of the Hills communities around Stirling, Bridgewater and Upper Sturt will be at risk if three ageing firetrucks at the end of their working lives are not replaced.

"I am concerned that the risk in the Adelaide Hills of a major fire such as the recent Victorian Black Saturday fires is extremely high, and that the CFS could be better prepared if the funding for resources was increased," CFS VA president Ken Schutz said.

"The CFS needs to be funded at a level that CFS volunteers do not have to fundraise to buy their own firetrucks."

Mt Lofty Group Officer Rainer Kiessling, who oversees a 650km area with eight CFS stations and a fleet of 30 vehicles, said volunteers were becoming increasingly frustrated.

"The one thing it always boils

the alarm

Are you a CFS volunteer battling with deficient equipment? Log on and share your experiences

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down to is that there's no money," he said. Mr Kiessling said his volunteers responded to about 1100 emergencies a year, in an area populated by 17,000 people.

"You don't see any professional emergency service organisation at the local club, selling a meat tray to raise funds for nozzles or chainsaws. It's ludicrous and we're suffering for it," he said.

"I instructed my group not to (use) community-raised funds on equipment that the CFS should supply."

Mr Kiessling said guidelines used to allocate resources were written more than 15 years ago and did not take into account population or climate change.

Stirling CFS captain Chris Vanstone said his unit's firetruck recently suffered an oil leak, causing the water pump to malfunction at a restaurant fire.

"It was a significant fire involving crews from Glen Osmond. There was about $30,000 damage," he said.

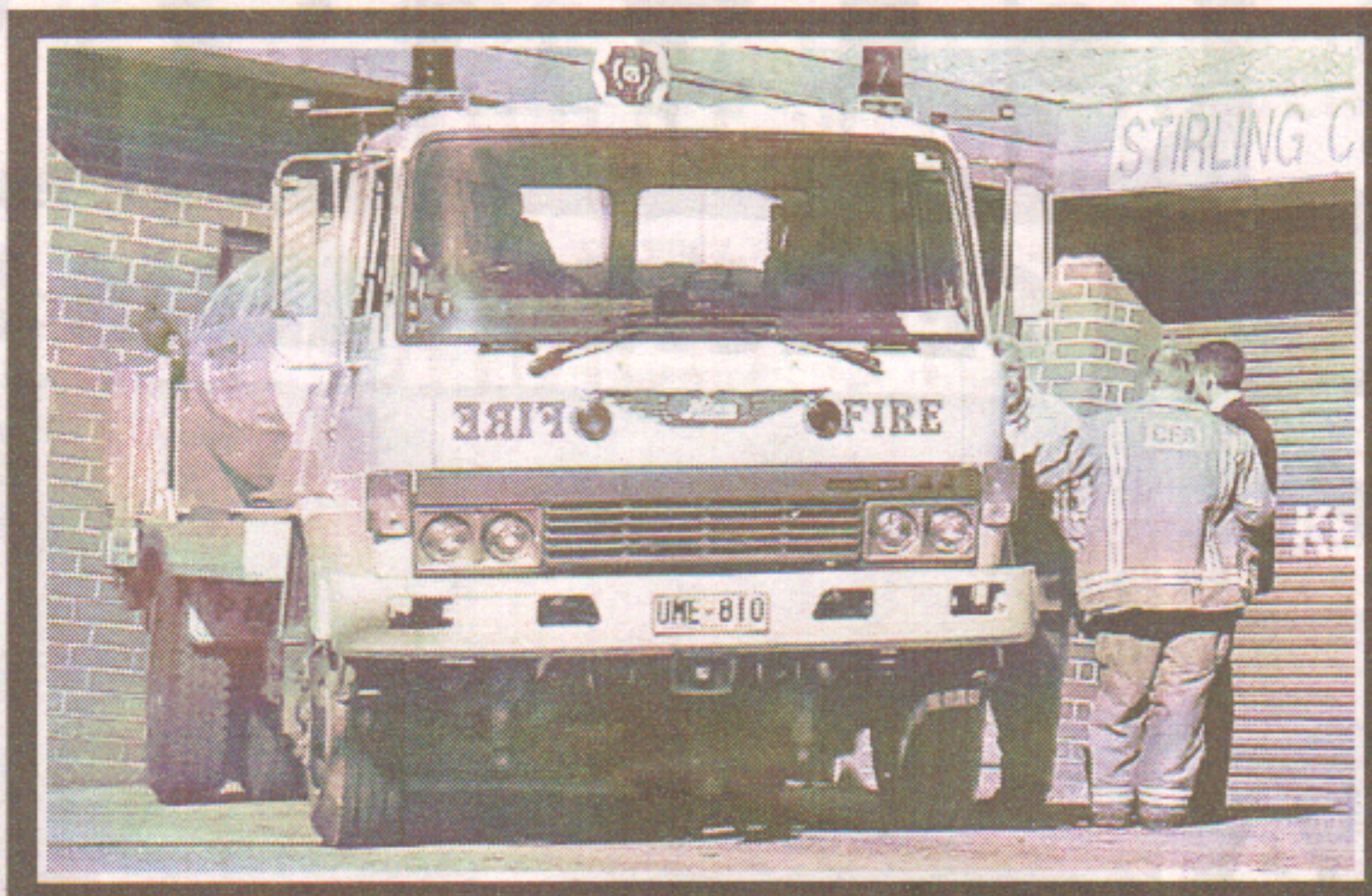
Mr Vanstone said the CFS refused to repair the 27-year-old truck because it had fewer than five years of life left, forcing volunteers to raise the $20,000 needed from public donations.

"That's a critical truck to get water to a fire. Without it, we'd be deficient, covering a huge area with a huge population, and that compromises operations," he said.

He also revealed he was told by CFS bosses to "buy an axe" when a chainsaw needed replacing.

Heysen Group Officer Peter Hammond said a request to replace 20-year-old airbags – used to lift cars in road crashes off passengers – was refused.

Sturt CFS Group Officer Mike Pearce said:"If we accept the minimum level (of funding), not only are we putting our members in danger – we are possibly endangering the public as well.



▲ VOLUNTEERS had to raise the $20,000 needed from public donations to repair this tanker

➤ DAVID Fitch with a pager for which volunteers are waiting months

▼ THE doors to this Hills shed are so old they take up to five minutes to open

"It's not like we want gold-plated hoses. We want equipment to make our job safe and easier."

Mawson Group Officer Peter Venning said specialist training courses had been put on hold because of a lack of funding: "We're talking driver training, four-wheel-drive training and training for hazardous materials."

Mt Lofty group communications officer David Fitch said new volunteers were waiting months for a pager with which to be alerted to emergencies, while others waited weeks for repairs to pagers.

"The pagers are pretty much the only way we have of calling people out to a fire," he said.

"I know Stirling has five members who don't have pagers at all because the CFS doesn't have enough. And I don't imagine that brigade would be alone in that."

The CFS Volunteers Association estimated 1000 pagers – at a cost of $195 each – were needed.

Volunteers Association president Ken Schutz blamed the funding shortfall on the system created by the 1999 introduction of the emergency services levy. "The ESL rate actually went down this year, with the statement that property values went up more than the cost of running the emergency services," he said.

"This is rubbish. The services all put in bids for increased funding which were knocked back, including extra, much-needed staff positions."

South Australian Fire and Emergency Services Commission CEO David Place said the CFS budget had increased from $41 million to $56 million between 2001 and 2008.

CFS Acting Chief Officer Andrew Lawson confirmed brigades and groups received $5.6 million from that total amount, but said they also benefited from additional funding to replace fire stations and appliances.

The rest of the budget was spent on infrastructure, air support, the government radio network, logistics and training, he said.

He denied Adelaide Hills communities would be put at risk: "Those three, brigade-owned trucks (at Stirling, Bridgewater and Upper Sturt) are above the standards of fire cover. That is specified what's above the minimum (Standards of Fire and Emergency) cover based on the risks."

He said he was unaware of the current state of CFS fire stations but that a working party would now investigate.

He said the CFS believed it was short only about 70 pagers, and ordering was an issue as they came in lots of 2000 at a time.

"We take the feelings of our volunteers very seriously," he said. "I can understand the passion of these people and how close they are to these issues."

On the replacement of equipment, Mr Lawson said the CFS would replace equipment "which is standard and approved".

A spokeswoman for Emergency Services Minister Michael Wright said: "We're confident that the current level of funding provided to emergency services is adequate."