

**HON PETER DUNNE CNZM**  
**CHAIR OF THE BOARD, UNITED FIRE BRIGADES ASSOCIATION**  
**ADDRESS TO 2023 ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING & CONFERENCE**  
**FRIDAY 3 NOVEMBER 2023**

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Tēnā koutou, he mihi mahana ki a koutou katoa.

A very warm welcome to you all to the 145<sup>th</sup> Annual General Meeting of the United Fire Brigades' Association.

**Chair Address**

This is one of our largest Annual General Meetings turnouts on record.

It validates the Engagement Strategy that the Board and management have been pursuing this year.

While it is always nice to see familiar faces and the opportunity that provides to catch up and renew friendships and acquaintances forged over the years, it is especially pleasing to welcome the influx of first-time delegates and observers here this year.

After all, you are the future of this organisation, and the UFBA needs your support and involvement, alongside the work you do in your local brigades, if we are to continue to prosper and grow in the future.

I look forward to your participation over the next few days.

I also welcome those of you who are watching via our live-stream.

We have also received apologies from Past Presidents and LHMs who were unable to attend today but are hopefully watching from home.

What seemed a novel technology when it started to become used during the pandemic era is now a much more mainstream and accepted form of communication.

Although I do not want to see it ever replace entirely face-to-face contacts and meetings, you can expect to see the UFBA using virtual meeting and related technologies much more regularly in the future, to convey information and obtain feedback much more quickly and immediately than has been the case previously.

Our presence here in such numbers today is a reminder to New Zealand, and to Fire and Emergency New Zealand especially, that 86% of their frontline firefighters, are volunteers, and that the UFBA has been their primary representative organisation for the last 145 years.

Earlier this year, firefighters were shattered by news of the tragic deaths of two volunteers from the Muriwai Volunteer Fire Brigade when responding to the impact of Cyclone Gabrielle on their local community.

The sacrifice of Dave van Zwannenberg and Craig Stevens tore at the heartstrings of all of us and was a tragic, timely reminder of the risks our members take when seeking to meet the needs of their communities.

We extend our deepest sympathy to Dave's and Craig's families, friends, and Brigade colleagues on their awful loss.

The UFBA, where we can, and through the Benevolent Fund has been supporting their families and others during the year as they adjust to this tragedy.

Dave's and Craig's sacrifices will never be forgotten.

In tribute to them, the UFBA will do all it can to ensure the proper lessons are learnt, and that their sacrifices will not have been in vain.

### **Board Membership and Staffing**

Before moving to the bulk of my remarks, I would like to give a special acknowledgement to our Patron, Dave McFarlane QSM, who is here today and will address the membership shortly.

I would like to introduce the members of our Board:

- Deputy Chair, Kevin Ihaka. He is the Managing Director of Forest Protection Services based in Whangārei and brings extensive experience in fighting wildfires across New Zealand, Australia, Canada, and North America. Kevin was previously Chair of the Forest and Rural Fire Association of New Zealand and was first appointed to the UFBA Board in 2019, then re-appointed in March 2023.
- Director, Daryl Sayer. Elected to the Board in 2018, Daryl is Chief Fire Officer of the Sumner Volunteer Fire Brigade and a community pharmacy owner. He is the chair of the Complaints and Disciplinary Committee.
- Director, Tom Thomson, QSM. Appointed to the Board in 2019, Tom is a former executive member of the Forest and Rural Fire Association of New Zealand. He is the Deputy Controller of the Motunau Rural Fire Brigade and the Managing Director of Elastomer Products. Tom is chair of the Board's Audit and Risk Committee.
- Director, Jason Prendergast. Elected to the Board in 2022, Jason is a Past President of the UFBA and is well-known to you all. He also supports the volunteers on the West Coast as a Volunteer Support Officer for FENZ. He is a long-serving and senior official for our Challenges and makes a valuable and conscientious contribution to the Board's deliberations.
- Director, Howard Cole, QSM. Elected in 2022, Howard has extensive experience with wildfire and is the Chief Fire Officer of the Maramarua Volunteer Fire Brigade. He is the managing director of three dairy farms in the Waikato, a former executive member of the Forest and Rural Fire Association of New Zealand and has been on the UFBA Membership Advisory Panel.

I also acknowledge our President Amber Hollis and Vice President Warren Maslin.

To the Board, Dave, Amber, and Warren, I express my thanks and appreciation for your contributions and support during the year.

You all serve the Association well.

And to our dedicated professional staff, so ably led by Chief Executive Bill Butzbach, thank you all for your dedication and service throughout the year.

Your commitment is inspiring, and I am in awe of the hard work you all put in on our behalf, to ensure the UFBA operates to the highest standards of professionalism.

### **Improving Community Resilience**

The devastation wrought by the cyclones that struck the north and east of the North Island earlier this year was a powerful reminder that our weather patterns are changing dramatically with often catastrophic consequences.

Already we have seen over the last couple of years more widespread and intense bush and scrub fires than what we have been accustomed to historically.

With the return of an El Nino weather pattern for the first time since 2015-16, more adverse events are to be expected over the next couple of years at least.

Beyond that, the wider impacts of climate change are likely to be severe and ongoing, stretching the capability of our emergency response services.

The one certainty in all this is that volunteer firefighters will play the dominant role in responding to those emergencies.

That raises the wider question of our resilience capability.

While our volunteers will always respond to the challenges facing their communities as professionally and skilfully as they can, as we saw earlier this year, there is a need for them to be better trained and resourced to have maximum beneficial impact.

In our view, it is incumbent upon FENZ to ensure that volunteer firefighters are at the front of the queue when it comes to better training and resourcing to deal with climate emergencies.

I note the PFU has made a similar call to FENZ in respect of its members.

But I say to FENZ and the PFU with the utmost respect that the priority needs to be with volunteer firefighters, for the simple reason that nearly all the small communities likely to be hit by future climate emergencies are served by volunteer firefighters.

It would be an unwise use of resources to focus on training and upskilling employed firefighters ahead of volunteers when the immediate response to future adverse events is likely to rest more heavily on the shoulders of volunteers.

At another level, changing climate and weather patterns have highlighted an urgent need for a better way of enabling those involved in land management issues, including forestry, to become more involved in the emergency management policies and practices that affect them.

For some time now the UFBA has been calling for the establishment of a new, independent forum for all those with an interest in wider land management issues so they can have a better say on the best emergency management policies for their sector and are able to offer specialist advice to FENZ and the government accordingly.

In 2021 the UFBA established Tāngata Matatau to be this peak organisation. FENZ's response has been lukewarm at best, as it prefers to believe its rural forums best meet the needs of this sector.

Following feedback from stakeholders that FENZ's rural forums are not meeting their concerns, the UFBA convened in July this year a meeting to further test the idea of a body like Tāngata Matatau.

We note that a similar structure has now been set up in Portugal following its recent devastating fires and that the European Union is encouraging other European states to do likewise.

At the July Tāngata Matatau meeting, there was strong support from many of the sectors present – including forestry, ambulance services and conservation groups – for a body like Tāngata Matatau to be established, so the UFBA is continuing to work on the plan.

Unfortunately, FENZ continues to remain sceptical, seemingly seeing the establishment of Tāngata Matatau as a direct challenge.

It is no such thing – FENZ's role is to be the primary delivery agent for fire and emergency services across New Zealand, whereas Tāngata Matatau is designed to be a high-level policy body delivering independent policy advice to FENZ but with no operational responsibility.

It would be a supplement to FENZ's role, not a challenge to it.

Tāngata Matatau fills a gap that is presently not catered for, but which needs to be addressed.

We earnestly urge FENZ to reconsider its wariness about Tāngata Matatau and to become directly involved, given its critical organisational and service delivery role.

### **Relationship with FENZ**

At last year's AGM, I was critical that progress on the full implementation of the 2017 reforms has slowed to an unacceptable rate, and I called on FENZ to pick up the pace of change once more.

I offered the UFBA's full support to working with FENZ to ensure that the fundamental impact of the 2017 reforms, to place urban and rural volunteers at the front and centre of the new organisation, and to be resourced accordingly was at last achieved.

Since that time, and following many discussions after the AGM, a great deal of progress has been with FENZ in addressing the outstanding issues.

The full details are set out in my Review of the Year in the Annual Report which you will have received a copy of, so they do not need repetition here.

Suffice it to say, there has now been progress or completion of just over 70% of the matters we expressed concern about, which we acknowledge.

While we will always have our differences, the relationship with FENZ is generally good.

Throughout the year the two Board chairs and chief executives have met regularly and enjoy a good working relationship.

Last week, the full FENZ and UFBA Boards met for the first time.

An earlier attempt in 2021 to bring the two Boards together had been thwarted by COVID-19 restrictions at the time.

At all times, we remind FENZ that 86% of its frontline workforce are volunteers and that the UFBA is its largest stakeholder and that it is important we work together constructively.

We remain committed to doing so.

### **Outstanding Issues**

Nevertheless, there are some outstanding issues the UFBA believes need to be progressed further.

We remain concerned that FENZ is not giving greater priority to strengthening its relationships with its key partners and the community generally.

We appreciate that the years of COVID-19 disruption distracted FENZ, as it did so many other organisations, from the wider picture.

But now the pandemic is largely behind us, and with changing environmental circumstances becoming more dominant, we think there is an urgent need for FENZ to increase its engagement level with its key stakeholders and the community generally, and we remain committed to working with FENZ to achieve that.

Beyond FENZ, we are keen to see progress on changes to the ACC legislation to ensure that volunteer firefighters are recognised as a unique group and fully covered by the ACC for specified occupational diseases.

These include specific cancers, asthma, heart attack, stroke, and musculoskeletal disorders they may contract in the course of their work as firefighters.

At present, they are not covered because, incredibly, volunteer firefighting has previously been classified by the ACC as a leisure activity, and therefore not subject to ACC coverage.

Our submissions to the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment seeking change are now before the government for consideration.

We will be pursuing this matter with Ministers at the earliest opportunity.

### **Challenges for the Future**

You will see from the Annual Report and the Financial Statements that the Association is in a sound financial position, with a prudent investment policy.

More details will be provided by the Chair of the Audit and Risk Committee when he speaks shortly.

Last year the government advanced a significant loan to FENZ so that it could settle the long-running dispute with its employed staff.

Repaying that loan will place further pressure on the FENZ budget, which is likely to impact our ongoing funding, a substantial portion of which is by way of an annual grant from FENZ.

What that means is that the 86% of firefighters who are volunteers are effectively being asked by the government to pay for salary increases for minority, who are employed staff.

While that is in its own way a telling reflection of the underlying attitude towards volunteers, it does create some new opportunities for the UFBA to diversify its income base to become more self-reliant.

A more self-reliant UFBA with its own income streams based on commercialising some of our operations, and seeking sponsorship for others will have more flexibility and freedom than at present.

The Board is looking to explore these opportunities, particularly in the areas of training and event management.

At the same time, changed funding arrangements and rising external costs will require us to look again at the way we currently do things.

Our Challenges are an important part of our annual calendar, as the unqualified success of this year's round of Challenges has shown.

The Board is very keen that they be retained and developed further.

Similarly with our Annual Conference.

At present, this is funded substantially by FENZ, and there is the possibility of it being expanded to become a more sector-wide event.

That is likely to mean there will be significant changes to the format and structure of the Annual General Meeting which, for understandable reasons, FENZ is not willing to fund.

Consistently with my earlier comments that the UFBA will be making much greater use of online meetings and general communications in the future, we are considering shifting future AGMs to a largely online format, to be held alongside or separately from the Annual Conference.

I must make it very clear that no definite decisions have been made on any of these matters at this stage, nor will they be without proper consideration by our members.

But I raise them now as matters we ought to be giving consideration to.

My intention is that any changes we ultimately make will enhance both the UFBA's ongoing relationship and contact with members, and the service it provides.

For that reason, I see the challenges ahead of us as positive opportunities to be embraced, rather than difficult problems to be overcome.

## **Conclusion**

Finally, let me pay a huge tribute to all of you for the constant way you serve your communities and keep them safe.

You are always on call, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.

For you, there are no shifts or rosters – your commitment means you are always on call.

And you respond when called out, rain hail, or shine.

Alongside your extraordinary commitment is the support of your families who support and encourage you.

You will have all endured disrupted family occasions to enable your partner, sibling, parent, or child to answer the community's call.

We owe you a huge debt of gratitude and a mighty thank you.

I must also acknowledge employers, who stand by you when you are called out.

Thank you for your ongoing support and understanding.

Our members are committed, highly skilled and uncomplaining.

You serve our communities passionately and professionally, and it is an absolute privilege to be working alongside you.

Please enjoy the next few days of camaraderie and learning.

I look forward to catching up with many of you over that time and I wish you well for the future.

Nō reira, tēnā koutou, tēnā tatou katoa.