

Speech to 137th Annual UFBA Conference
Hon Peter Dunne, Minister of Internal Affairs
2.00pm, Friday 13th November 2015, TSB Arena Wellington

Firstly I would like to start by acknowledging the following people from the UFBA here today:

your President, Mark Adie, and Vice-President, Russell Anderson;

your Chief Executive Officer, George Verry;

Deputy chair of the UFBA Board, Nigel Lilley and Board members Bill Butzbach, Glenn Williams, and Matt Cleaver; Rick Braddock, Chairperson of the UFBA Board, and Patron of the UFBA, Dame Margaret Bazley.

I would also like to acknowledge the Rt Hon. Wyatt Creech, chair of the NZ Fire Service Commission, who is also speaking to you today.

Lastly, thank you to the Deputy Mayor of Wellington, Justin Lester, for welcoming you all to Wellington.

When I attended your conference in Tauranga last year I spoke of the Government's response to the Swain review into the Fire Service that was carried out in 2013.

I said then that:

“The current fire service legislation dates back to the 1970s, when a firefighter's role was largely to put out fires.

That legislation in the main nationalised the Fire Service, but did not really address the basic structure which has not changed too much since the 1940s.

The legislation has not been overhauled since 1975.

However, as you will be well aware, activities and expectations have evolved considerably, meaning we now have very different-looking fire services.”

I noted that arising from the Swain Report, there was likely to be a further review of the Fire Service to address these points, and in May this year I released a major Government discussion paper setting out options for reforming the Fire Service.

I made it clear in that document that we needed to do more to support our volunteers, ensure fire services meet community expectations, and modernise the management of fire services.

I also said that any proposed changes would not be imposed; but rather arrived at through widespread consultation, and would reflect and embrace the views of those in our fire services.

Over the following few weeks I held 35 meetings with various stakeholders up and down the country, and around 235 public submissions were received by the Review Team, on the future shape, direction and funding of the Fire Service.

These consultation meetings, and the submissions, sent a strong message in favour of change, which ran right through the different sectors of our fire services – rural and urban, volunteers and career firefighters, small towns and big cities.

More importantly, the Review prompted excellent dialogue about the things that make our fire services one of the most respected and trusted public services in New Zealand.

Themes that came up at the consultation meetings and in the submissions emphasised the importance of strong links between the fire services and their communities, the need for strong support for volunteers, effective service delivery and options for improving funding sources.

Since the end of the formal submission process my officials and I have been in intense discussion with all the individual stakeholders, and my Ministerial colleagues about the best future structure for the Fire Service to meet those goals of stronger support for our volunteers at all levels, ensuring fire services meet community expectations, and modernising the management of fire service to make it fit for purpose in the 21st century.

I want to acknowledge and thank you for the role you have played in this vitally important process, and for the input you provided.

Your conference theme this year is *Sustainability through Diversity*, which speaks to some of the UFBA goals of 'Strong, sustainable bridges' and 'Fit-for-purpose legislation', all of which perfectly aligned with the goals of this Fire Services review.

Today, I am delighted to announce the culmination of all these discussions, and decisions we have made on what the future Fire Service will look like.

We will proceed with the Swain Review's recommendations to modernise the mandate of the Fire Service, to include its role in activities like urban search and rescues, motor vehicle assists and extrications and other emergency services which it currently performs but actually has no legal mandate for.

The Government has also agreed to bring together volunteer, career, urban and rural firefighters together in one, integrated, new national fire service.

This means recognising and respecting their differences and providing support appropriate for their needs.

New investment in volunteers reflects the fact that they represent more than 80% of our firefighters, but does not detract from the support given to the paid workforce.

Consistent with a theme that emerged during the consultation process about the importance of ensuring a strong regional voice in the fire service, the new national organisation will be supported by a network of regional advisory committees to ensure both the protection of a regional and community-focussed perspective and its input into the work of the fire service.

The new national body will be responsible for resourcing fire services, training and professional standards, but will work with the regional boards on delivery matters.

This is not a takeover of any one part by Wellington or HQ, but is rather a merging of the talents.

It is about strengthening both rural AND urban services to deliver consistency across the country.

The regional boards are there to ensure that no one is overlooked, and that the particular interests of our regions are taken fully into account.

We understand that it is critical to have a leadership function at the Brigade and Volunteer Rural Fire Forces (VRFF) level, and will work with key stakeholders to ensure the title and details of the leadership roles in the new organisation will be effective and that rank is recognised.

The new fire service will continue to be funded primarily through the levies on insurance premia, with the final details to be resolved over the next little while.

I am committed to ensuring that our fire services have the appropriate level of funding, that takes into account prudent financial management, balanced with making sure you have the equipment, training, back-up and support to continue to do your jobs well.

It is clear that the new unified fire services will require new thinking, to get the very best that a new national organisation can provide, while retaining all that works well locally such as fire land management tools, to keeping the gratuity system.

I also want to address the elephant in the room, the recent media coverage of bullying at certain brigades.

The New Zealand Fire Service has already been working hard to eradicate this, and the new organisation will be tasked with ensuring that all staff work more effectively together.

This will include new proposals for dispute resolution to be determined through some further work, as part of more detailed announcements that I intend to make early next year, including the appointment of a new fire service board.

Some stakeholders raised concerns about local assets like the stations or engines having been funded by the community, and I want to give an assurance that there will be a managed process involving stakeholders to work out a way to deal with any asset transfer.

Now for some of the technical points.

There is going to be significant transformational change, which requires effective transition management.

The new organisation will be a successor to the NZFS Commission and while it will continue to be a Crown Agent, it will have an expanded role.

This will require additional support and resources not only internally but from other agencies of the Crown.

The Government will need to be confident that the new organisation can achieve what is expected of an expanded emergency services organisation in the years ahead.

To that end, we will continue to monitor the new organisation closely to ensure that it will deliver services efficiently and manage its expenditure carefully.

The new organisation will be an amalgamation of the NZFS, the NRFA, and RFAs (including the ERFDs).

Legislation to replace the current Fire Service Act and the Forest and Rural Fires Act will be introduced to Parliament next year, and it is my aim to have the new fire service in place by mid-2017.

There will be ongoing opportunities for you to have your say throughout the transition and implementation, as well as input into the legislative Select Committee process.

The review team continue to work closely with the UFBA and all stakeholders to make sure your issues are addressed, and I want to formally thank the UFBA again for the outstanding participation in this whole process.

You have provided a strong, clear and influential voice throughout this review.

Taken together, these changes represent not only the biggest reform of our fire service since the aftermath of the disastrous Ballantyne's fire in Christchurch in 1947, but they will also help position it well for the future, and ensure both its community accountability and ongoing financial sustainability.

But we need to work together to make these changes successful.

We need to cut through any differences and focus on what will draw us together to find a sensible way forward that will deliver the best outcome for our communities.

This is the first stage in a journey.

Translating the decisions we have already made into a working reality will inevitably contain new challenges, as not every expectation will be able to be met, but you have my assurance and continuing commitment to see the process through, to the establishment of the new fire service, fit for purpose in the first half of the 21st century.

Thank you for your ongoing support.