

National Rural Fire Authority

National Rural Fire Officer Kevin O'Connor presentation to the UFBA conference 15/11/15

- President Mark Adie, Board members , Patron Dame Margaret Bazley, Chair of the Commission Rt. Honourable Wyatt Creech, friends and colleagues, kiaora tato .
- Firstly I would like express my thanks to the UFBA conference team for their invitation to be part of this conference. I really appreciate the opportunity to present to you – even if it is early on the morning after your conference dinner.
- The Minister, Peter Dunne, Chair of the Commission Wyatt Creech and Chief Executive Paul Baxter have already talked about the Fire Services Review, but I would like to add a few thoughts of my own for you to consider.
- The review is a big opportunity for fire and emergency services in New Zealand, now that the Minister and Cabinet have landed in principle on what they would like for our future new united service.
- There is still the challenge of working out the details about funding, but let's remember that this is just detail and most of the important decisions around the high level principles are now taken.
- I had the opportunity to travel with the Minister during the consultation phase and I was highly impressed by the interest and positive views from firefighters, both urban and rural, and paid and unpaid, about the possibilities for a future integrated fire service.
- Almost everyone acknowledged that the time was right to have one integrated fire service that was focused on

delivering the whole spectrum of services, whether motor vehicle extrications, structural fires, vegetation fires or civil defence responses.

- My observation was that, given the merits of the idea and also the extent of the support for change, it was a “no-brainer” that we should do things differently and have a single integrated service.
- The Minister commented on how impressed he was with the openness and eagerness of firefighters and stakeholders for improving the services currently provided to their communities. My summary of this is that our people are behind the change and are certainly “up for it”.
- During the road show with the Minister, I came to the conclusion that the rural/urban split wasn't really an issue for most. To illustrate the point, brigade and VRFF volunteers at one meeting in Auckland said they would prefer to see the rural /urban labels removed because their work spanned both categories, and the “rural” and “urban” labels didn't clearly represent what they did or what they were delivering. Rather, it was simply a hangover of historic arrangements that had relevance when brigades and volunteer rural fire forces were established. But that relevance has ceased and the names largely irrelevant to the real and core work that you all do.
- In other words, people are very open to concentrating on their actual work rather than being overly concerned about historic labels or branding.
- The opportunity created by the Government's decision to reform our fire and mandated emergency services is not only exciting but also a challenge. As the Minister has said, volunteers are central to the future of the new organisation

and he wants them to have a clear voice on how it should take shape and work.

- The input of volunteers will be a very important opportunity for all of you here today to have some real influence on our future. There are some 13,500 firefighters in New Zealand, 11,600 of whom are volunteers. Quite simply, their commitment is selfless and hugely impressive. How the views of these 11,600 will be considered and factored into the design and policies of the new organisation is a big challenge.
- I suggest now is the time for you to give some careful thought as to how your opinions can be formed into a coherent voice that can influence change. This voice also needs to be representative of the 11,600 volunteers from the 360 Brigades and 187 VRFFs around the country. The UFBA, to my mind, needs to play a key leadership role in making this happen.
- Each individual CFO also has a key leadership responsibility. Each of you needs to take your teams and communities on the journey and keep them engaged and enthusiastic. This responsibility extends to thinking about how you can work with and include your rural colleagues.
- It's no secret that the rural teams are a little concerned about how the change will pan out for them. Many are concerned it will be a takeover – not necessarily a hostile takeover – but a takeover nonetheless.
- They are concerned they will get lost along the way. They are also very concerned about how the different organisations' cultures will merge together. My challenge to you all is to think about how you personally, and as representatives of your brigades, can allay this concern.

- Already many of you train and work with VRFFs or are rural firefighters. I urge you to think hard about how you might work on this front and make this happen effectively. The fact is that the more face-to-face contact there is, the better.
- After all, you're all trying to do the best for your respective communities. The motivations are the same. Some of the traditions are slightly different and the uniforms where they exist among the VRFFs are usually very different. Many things are also the same – you are all focused on putting out fires, attending MVAs and so on and you are all particularly focused on serving your own communities.
- So I urge you to think about how you might train together or join together for exercises or social functions. If you don't know each other especially well, create opportunities to get to know one another. Get over the differences and focus on what you all have in common. Of course I need to acknowledge that many of you already have great relationships and understanding with your colleagues in RFAs
- We should also not expect that the transition into a new Service will go off without a single hitch. There will be difficult decisions taken and there will be difficult personalities to deal with from time to time. You won't necessarily agree with every decision taken. Such things invariably create tensions. Many aspects will not be perfect at the start, and some things will take a few years to iron out.
- I encourage you to be generous about the difficult bits and to focus on the long-term big picture of an integrated new Service delivering more effectively to your local communities.

- I am very optimistic about the future. It is sure to be an exciting couple of years, so please make the most of the opportunity to become involved and to influence how the new structure looks and works.
- Last year my challenge to the UFBA was to think and work on ways you could be more relevant to your rural colleagues. . My challenge to you is still the same but now to accept the challenge in the context of the fire services review and our new Service.
- Again, I want to encourage you all to take your leadership responsibilities seriously and to do your best to help lead your teams and communities to deliver what I am sure will be a very effective and efficient new organisation.

Thank you again for the opportunity to address you. And again, congratulations on all the great work you do for your communities.