

UFBA Board Chair AGM Speech

05 November 2021

I would like to welcome you all to the UFBA's Annual General Meeting for 2021.

It seems our ability to adapt, has become our new norm as we meet once more online.

And you our members, are by nature, also very good at adapting to responding to unexpected changes.

I acknowledge you, as you continue to serve and protect our communities during these difficult times.

It is your unwavering service-ethos, that binds us together.

Your commitment to protect life, property and the environment is unrelenting.

For that reason alone, the Association strongly believes much more must be done, to equally support and protect you.

I will say more about this shortly – suffice it to say at this point that it was a strong reason for my agreeing to become your Chair earlier this year.

Before we head into the formalities of the AGM, there are a few matters I must set out.

To commence, I would like to introduce your Board members:

- Director Daryl Sayer. Elected to the Board in 2018. Chief Fire Officer of Sumner volunteer fire brigade. Daryl is also a community pharmacy owner.
- Director Kevin Ihaka. Appointed to the Board in 2019. Kevin is the Managing Director Forest Protection Services based in Whangārei and brings extensive experience in fighting wildfires across NZ and Australia, Canada and the US, and former Chair of the Forest and Rural Fire Association of New Zealand.
- Director, Jacqui Apiata-Coyne. Appointed to the board in 2021. A highly-qualified post-graduate executive, former World Champion Athlete and Coach, and Board member of the Forestry Industry Safety Council. Jacqui is an experienced Board member who is well respected in the fields of not-for-profit governance, research and programme development, and health and safety audit and risk management.
- Director Warren Maslin. Elected to the Board in 2017. A senior firefighter from Ashburton Volunteer Fire brigade with 21 years' experience as a volunteer. Warren had 30 years in banking prior to starting his own business. Warren is Chair of the UFBA Audit & Risk Committee.
- Director Tom Thomson. Appointed to the Board in 2019. A former executive member of the Forest and Rural Fire Association of New Zealand. Deputy Controller of the Motunau Rural Fire Brigade. Tom is the Managing Director of Elastomer Products.

As Chair, I also extend my sincere thanks to three retiring Board members:

Russell Anderson, known to most of you, completes his term on the Board.

First elected as President in 2015, Russell was then appointed to the Board for two terms from 2016 and in the later term, as Deputy Chair of the Board.

Russell has been instrumental in helping to shepherd in many changes - the merger of the Forest and Rural Fire Association of NZ and the UFBA, and a new Constitution two years ago, to name a few.

I want to acknowledge the strong contribution Russell has made during his seven years in these roles. On behalf of the Board and members, I extend our heart-felt appreciation for his service.

Brenda Pilott, who was elected to the Board in June 2018.

Prior to stepping-down mid-year 2020 to pursue other interests, Brenda made a positive and significant contribution to the UFBA, and we also thank her for her service.

And, Richie Smith who served as Chair of the Board until June this year. Based in Tekapo, Richie has been a professional director since 1985, covering a broad range of sectors, including start-up, export and foreign investment, farming, transport, fast-moving consumer goods, and postal services.

Richie brought this sound corporate governance experience to the Board and made a significant contribution to the professionalism of our Association.

I want to put on record our appreciation of his service and to wish him well for the future.

Just after becoming Chair, I met with Rebecca Keoghan, the new Chair of Fire and Emergency NZ, and with Rhys Jones, Chief Executive, shortly after Rebecca took office.

I reaffirmed then the UFBA's role as the primary advocate for its members and said that I wanted the UFBA to be more assertive on behalf of its members, in this role.

I conveyed the UFBA's ongoing commitment to a positive working arrangement with FENZ, recognising the importance of the strategic partnership we have.

I advised them that whilst we work closely with FENZ, we are not a mirror image of it and there will be times when we disagree.

In doing so however, we would always seek to work constructively with FENZ to jointly uphold the highest professional and operational standards.

To this end, I have to put it to FENZ to advise how they will make up for lost time in the four-years since the new organisation was established, and increased funding was given, to better support volunteers.

Not only do I have a personal interest in seeing the reform process completed, but I am also well aware that it is in the best interests of our members, urban and rural, that it be done so in a timely manner.

In the year ahead, we must see the matter of Brigade Agreements of Service and Model Rules resolved.

And it is high time that we have a unified uniform, and greater consistency in the application of FENZ policies across the regions, on important matters such as training and fleet.

I am pleased to say that it was a very constructive meeting and bodes well for the ongoing relationship between the UFBA and FENZ, and for the work ahead for us both.

Because we are your national advocate, you will see more campaigns to bring greater fairness and equity.

Our present Campaign calls for better coverage and support for volunteers who fall ill or are injured in the line of duty.

So far, over 1250 members have participated in the online survey calling for change.

Our discussions with politicians, FENZ, and other lead government agencies, are well underway, and look promising to deliver change.

The UFBA is soon to commission an independent and professional research study into gather information on cancers affecting volunteer firefighters.

Beyond that, I would like to see more done within the UFBA to strengthen our support of our rural, international, and Industry brigades.

The Board and management are committed to developing a full plan to give effect to these priorities and you can expect to see more details of this over the months ahead.

Consistent with our priorities of unifying and valuing our membership, I expect everyone involved with the UFBA to uphold the highest professional and personal standards as we go about our respective roles.

In this regard, I am aware of the situation that arose last year concerning our Chief Executive.

While I was not on the Board at that time nor part of any of the discussions that took place then, I have, since becoming your Chair, reviewed what happened.

That has included full access to material and determinations by other, independent organisations that have also been involved.

I am aware that after a Police investigation no charges were laid against our Chief Executive.

There has also been a comprehensive, independent investigation, commissioned by FENZ, which did not uphold the allegations made.

And there was the Board's own proposed inquiry last year.

I take allegations, regarding misbehaviour and improper conduct very seriously, including the behaviour of members and their representatives when raising such matters.

In this case, my understanding is that professional standards were followed by the Board in their seeking to engage fairly and respectfully with all parties involved in an attempt to bring resolution to the matter.

Both sides need to be heard and have their respective positions tested.

Although I understand the reasons why the Board's inquiry did not proceed, I acknowledge that this has raised the wider question of our professional standards and conduct, and how we apply those.

I expect every member of this organisation, whatever level they are at, no matter how senior or new they may be, without exception, to uphold the highest standards of personal and professional conduct in carrying out their duties.

So my message today is clear – there is no place for bullying and harassment in this organisation.

I know of the strong role this Association played in the development of Fire and Emergency's Behaviour and Conduct Office earlier this year, and of the standards it upholds in the Advocacy and Support Service that volunteers can access, at no charge from the UFBA.

That is good, and what I would expect of an organisation representing the overwhelming majority of fire fighters in New Zealand.

But we need to go further than that.

We need to adopt a new approach to the behaviour and conduct standards which govern the practice of members of this Association, and that of UFBA employees.

Standards that are consistent with, and befitting of, the work we all do serving the public interest - and no less than what the public would expect of us, or what we should expect of each other.

Two years ago, this Association amended its Constitution, with a comprehensive set of complaints and grievance procedures, including provision for the establishment of a disciplinary committee.

It is now time for these procedures and the disciplinary committee to happen.

When implemented and supported with relevant and specific codes of personal and professional conduct, they will lead to more satisfactory outcomes, and certainty of process for all in a situation when matters relating to personal conduct arise.

I am strongly committed to achieving that.

Complaints about personal conduct or acting in a manner which brings the reputation of the Association into disrepute are serious and deserve to be treated in a way that is consistent, respectful, clear and fair to all concerned.

That is why the development of a new code of conduct in consultation with our members and the establishment of the disciplinary committee, are priorities I will make sure are put in place.

There will be an equivalent process for UFBA employees.

In the interests of fairness and certainty I intend to see these new arrangements in place as soon as possible.

The ongoing public criticism of the Chief Executive by a small group of members cannot go on the way it has done since 2020.

As a matter of record, I have also received significant and wide-spread messages of support from members and others in the fire services sector for the Chief Executive.

Also as a matter of record, the Chief Executive, whom, I am informed, cooperated fully with the investigation.

I have already noted that neither the Police, nor Fire and Emergency's investigations found against the Chief Executive.

I have to tell members that the Board's own inquiry did not proceed because the terms of reference could not be agreed to with the complainants, including matters as to the process for the investigation, who would have access to the complaints, the evidence provided, and the final reports.

In addition, despite several requests, one of the complainant's would not agree to the Board giving the Chief Executive a complete copy of the allegations made against him.

The requests by the complainants could not be agreed to by the Board as they would have breached natural justice and privacy and employment law. The UFBA Board therefore could not agree to the conditions the complainants sought for the terms of reference.

After four-months of trying to gain agreement, the independent legal Queen's Council appointed to investigate the allegations, could not continue with the investigation as the complainants would not agree to meet with her in full to progress the investigation.

That impasse left the previous Board in an impossible position, and means, bluntly, we have ended up in a situation which is unsatisfactory to all the parties concerned.

This highlights why we need to change the way we deal with behaviour and conduct issues when they arise in the future.

It is time to move on from last year's specific proceedings in favour of the more comprehensive, transparent and evidence-based provisions I have just foreshadowed, and which you voted for in the Constitution two years ago.

I encourage members to engage in this development process, so we can move forward.

As an Association, we have work to do to unify our membership as we adapt our services to be more inclusive of our diverse membership, **and how we work with each other, not against one-another**, as we enter the next decade of change with FENZ.

Kia Kotahi Tātou (we are one)

Released for UFBA members