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ISSUES NEED TO BE ADDRESSED TO SUSTAIN VITAL EMERGENCY SERVICES VOLUNTEERS: AUDITOR GENERAL

In his latest report released in Parliament today, Auditor General Colin Murphy warned that maintaining a sustainable emergency services volunteer workforce was an important issue that needed to be addressed.

Mr Murphy said Western Australia relied on fire and emergency services volunteers who gave their time to respond to often demanding and dangerous situations.

“In 2013-14, around 31 000 structural and landscape fires, road crashes, natural disasters and other incidents were recorded with volunteers responding to around a third of these,” Mr Murphy said.

“The Department of Fire and Emergency Services (DFES) has made significant progress towards improving the management of its volunteer workforce but still has a considerable amount of work to do in some areas.

“I was pleased to hear through our survey that volunteers were happy with the equipment they receive to carry out their duties.

“However, my report identifies a number of issues that still need to be addressed if volunteers are to be fully and appropriately recruited, prepared and supported to carry out their crucial role.

“These issues include an upward trend in volunteer turnover, a declining number of volunteer groups, especially in regional areas, and concerns about fatigue.

“DFES has a number of projects that should deliver improvements in these areas, however many are still in planning or early implementation stages.”

The state has well over 20 000 volunteers, of which DFES has direct responsibility for around one third. It is less involved with the other volunteers, who are under the direct authority of local governments.

Mr Murphy said many of the problems he had identified had arisen from, or were affected by gaps and inaccuracies in volunteer membership, training and incident data.

“Without accurate information about volunteers, DFES struggles to understand how many volunteers are needed and where, and the level of equipment, training and support they need,” he said.

“Volunteers are a critical part of the state’s response to fires and emergencies that occur every day and I encourage DFES to act on the recommendations of my report and continue to ensure the dedication and commitment of volunteers is nurtured and supported for the good of the state.”

The Auditor General’s report, *Support and Preparedness of Fire and Emergency Services Volunteers* (Report 17 – August 2015), is available on the Office of the Auditor General website at www.audit.wa.gov.au

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