

Fire revamp 'risks emergency response'

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Victorian towns devastated in the deadly Black Saturday blazes are at risk of being exposed again in an emergency under a proposed restructure of the forest fire workforce that will close depots, the Australian Workers Union has warned.

The Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) is planning to make 208 people redundant in its bushfire and forest services group, including 118 in forest fire operations - a move the department acknowledges could risk its contribution to emergency management in the short to medium term.

Many of those working back-of-house at the department also have a frontline role fighting fires and in other emergencies through Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMVic).

The AWU is now considering joining the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) as it takes the state government to the Fair Work Commission over the cuts.

Under its plan, DEECA is also looking to close some of its 99 regional work centres and redirect funds to higher risk areas - but the AWU has warned that would leave gaps in coverage in emergencies.

"The proposed closure of the Lysterfield and Plenty Gorge work centres will also leave geographical gaps in coverage for emergency response," the union said in its formal response - obtained by *The Age* - to the department this month.

"With Melbourne Water also closing their Kinglake work centre, and DEECA slated to do the same, there will be significantly less cover-

age in areas that were greatly impacted by the Black Saturday fires."

The 2009 Black Saturday bushfires killed 173 people in Victoria and burned through more than 400,000 hectares.

Under DEECA's proposal, frontline field staff would be bolstered with 54 extra workers.

But the AWU said some "new" positions were actually existing back-of-house jobs shifted onto the lower-paid field workforce - not



Cuts 'will leave gaps' in fire fighting.

the promised extra resources. Given some field staff roles were also being cut, the union has asked for a breakdown to get a better understanding of total new jobs.

Lead organiser Ross Kenna said the AWU was considering lodging a dispute with Fair Work.

The CPSU has already done so, with a hearing listed for Friday. That union, which claimed the department had failed to meaningfully consult on the changes, also said its members would be disadvantaged by their existing work shifting into lower-paid field positions.

The forest fire operations team - where 118 jobs could be lost - "delivers integrated land and fire management activities across

state forests", according to department documents.

As part of FFMVic, the division also undertakes "bushfire management across all public land in Victoria, and supports other Class 1 and Class 2 emergencies", which have the potential to be or are deadly.

Consultation documents circulated to staff in August - obtained by *The Age* - acknowledged that cutting this division "may reduce ability in the short to medium term to contribute to sector-wide [emergency management] arrangements".

The document said the change would streamline planning and result in better integration of forest and fire management.

The department said it had not reviewed its operations since 2017 and that its role changed when the Parks Victoria fire program was transferred to DEECA, and since the ban on native timber logging.

The department will finalise the restructure this month.

A government spokeswoman said the 54 new forest firefighter roles at FFMVic would be funded through a \$36.9 million investment, and that \$20 million would upgrade critical forest fire emergency equipment.

"Our capacity to deliver bushfire management works or respond in an emergency has not changed - there is no decrease in the number of field staff under these proposed changes," she said.

DEECA deputy secretary Kelly Crosthwaite said it was working through feedback on the proposed operating model that would "deliver value for taxpayers and make sure we have the right people working on the right things".