

This article was written by Jean Edwards

Thorough chemical testing of soil and water at properties neighbouring the Country Fire Authority's (CFA) Fiskville training college is needed to ensure people are not being exposed to dangerous toxins, a Victorian parliamentary inquiry has recommended.

The committee examined claims dozens of firefighters who worked or trained at Fiskville suffered cancers linked to dangerous firefighting chemicals over several decades.

It recommended the State Government oversee the "thorough testing of soil and water, including tank water, on adjoining or relevant properties", in an interim report tabled in Parliament.

"It is important to ensure people living or working on these properties are not subject to ongoing unacceptable risks of exposure," the report said.

Emergency Services Minister Jane Garrett said the Government would consider compensation for farmers if their livestock was contaminated.

"If those test results are concerning then of course there will have to be analysis of how livestock and farmland are dealt with," she said.

"Part of that may well need to be compensation for those land owners for their loss of livelihood."

The committee said property owners should be able to request the test results to see if they were still being exposed to the toxic chemical PFOS.

It found the stories of people, who had lived near Fiskville and believe their ill-health is linked to the training college, have largely been ignored.

The inquiry also said firefighters and staff who wanted records from the CFA and other government agencies should be given access "without hindrance".

"Many people have told us they have had difficulty in getting information from the CFA", inquiry chair Bronwyn Halfpenny said.

"It cannot be denied that many people who put their trust in the leadership of the Country Fire Authority now feel betrayed."

Chemicals used at CFA training base 'undeniably toxic'

The committee recommended the Government assess the feasibility of providing free voluntary testing for PFOS to firefighters, staff, trainees, and people from neighbouring properties.

The report found some of the chemicals used for firefighting training were "undeniably carcinogenic and toxic".

"Health and safety practices at Fiskville were poor and there was minimal OH&S training until the 1990s," the report said.

"There is significant criticism and mistrust about the role of CFA management, especially from the late 1980s to the present, and views expressed that the CFA was more concerned with protecting its own reputation."

The report suggested some form of compensation might need to be considered for firefighters who have fallen ill.

'Truth will be exposed'

United Firefighters Union secretary Peter Marshall said the report's recommendations would help to lift a "veil of secrecy" over what happened at Fiskville.

"We're most confident the truth will finally be exposed as to what really went on at Fiskville, most importantly, who knew what, and who covered up what," he said.

Mick Tisbury, who trained Metropolitan Fire Brigade officers at the site, said he wanted the CFA to take responsibility.

"Don't treat your employees as expendable commodities. We're not resources, we're human beings, we've got families," he said.

CFA chief executive Michael Wootten said he supported the report's recommendations to ensure greater transparency.

"CFA has been under the microscope during the inquiry and so it should be," he said.

"If people need to be held to account, they will be.

"We will review the negative statements and allegations heard during the inquiry and respond as an organisation via further submissions to the inquiry on behalf of people who feel they have been unfairly judged."

The CFA closed Fiskville in March, as a result of water testing that detected elevated levels of PFOS.

The committee is yet to hear evidence from the CFA, the MFB, the Environment Protection Authority and WorkSafe.

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