

Fire readiness must remain a top priority

- **The Canberra Times**

While Police and Emergency Services Minister Simon Corbell refrained from saying the ACT's firefighters are "crying wolf", his response to Wednesday's call for an additional 100 of them to be employed over the next four years can be read that way.

Members of the United Firefighters Union, many of whom still have vivid memories of what happened here 13 years ago, have launched a campaign targeting what they see as a lack of readiness to meet a similar challenge. The union wants people to quiz ACT election candidates on their stance on the issue.



Veteran Canberra fire fighters Commander Stephen Gibbs, left, and Station Officer Sam Evans at the launch of the United Firefighters Union Rescue Canberra's Future campaign. *Photo: David Ellery*

Mr Corbell, not unsurprisingly, gave himself and his government a pass mark on the way they have handled ACT Fire and Rescue and the ACT Rural Fire Service in recent years.

He lists as achievements the construction of new training and helicopter facilities, the replacement of vehicles, the construction of three new fire stations and an expansion of the Remote Area Firefightin

Mr Corbell also gave the government a pat on the back for the largely happy accident that fire incidents in the ACT run at about 220 per 100,000 people, about half the national average of 413 per 100,000.

And, best of all, "we have the second lowest response time in Australia, with 90 per cent of structure fires responded to within 11 minutes".

Given Canberra's unique status as Australia's only city state with by far the highest population density of any jurisdiction in the country, the obvious question is "why are we only second?"

Mr Corbell's statement failed to address very specific concerns raised by the union about understaffing, access to special purpose equipment, the need to staff the new fire stations at Chisholm and Molongolo on a full time basis and the pressure to evolve the service in order for it be ready to handle an increasing road rescue role, the ongoing impacts of climate change and the rise of terrorism.

It is not enough for governments to deliver a bare minimum in terms of service growth and then go to the electorate in the expectation they will be rewarded with a gold star and an invitation to return for another term.

Given the traumatic legacy from the events of 2003 it is incumbent on any ACT government, regardless of its political hue, to ensure a service exists that can take meaningful action when the sky is so black it seems to be falling and the whole world looks like it is on fire.

That is the situation this community faced 13 years ago and it is one that may occur again, should we find ourselves not properly prepared.

The community, and its fire service, was caught unawares on that occasion.

The question the current government needs to be asking is "have we done enough to ensure ACT Fire and Rescue is, in every respect, ready?"

According to the experts on the front line, the answer is "no".