



## UNITED FIREFIGHTERS UNION OF AUSTRALIA

### NATIONAL BULLETIN

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# UFU Representatives Appearance Before Senate Committee on PFAS in Melbourne

#### TO ALL UFUA MEMBERS,

For over 20 years, the UFUA have been representing firefighters at a national and international level to call for strict regulation of the use of per and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS). We know, and the research backs us up, that exposure to PFAS chemicals puts firefighters at an unacceptable risk of cancer and other serious health issues. However, for too long have vested interests influenced governments to delay any regulation in this space, actively compromising the safety of firefighters for a healthier bottom line.

The UFUA's fight still continues.

On 22 August 2024, the Australian Senate moved to establish a Select Committee on PFAS, a move that should yield real outcomes, the likes of which are decades in the making. The UFUA, along with the UFU Aviation Branch and Mick Tisbury, the UFUA PFAS representative, acting on behalf of Fire Rescue Victoria, provided Submissions to the Committee (see footnotes).<sup>1</sup> On the back of these Submissions, we were all invited to present evidence to the Committee on 4 June 2025.

#### Opening Statements

*Assistant Chief Fire Officer Mick Tisbury and Commander Dave Hamilton – FRV*

The hearing began with statements from Mick Tisbury, alongside FRV Commander and UFUVIC President Dave Hamilton. Mick, speaking from his 15+ years of advocacy in this space, put aside his prepared statement and instead spoke off the cuff from years of built-up frustration in the face of inaction.

Speaking to this frustration, Mick stated:

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<sup>1</sup> Linked are the following: [FRV Submission](#) | [UFUA Submission](#) & [Supplementary Submission](#) | [UFU Aviation Submission](#).

*I'm actually sick to death of giving evidence at these parliamentary inquiries, Senate committee hearings, PFAS expert panels, the United Nations Stockholm convention and POPRC because I've been doing it for 15 years and nothing has changed.*

*We come to you guys begging you to protect us so we can continue to protect the community, and, to be quite frank, it's fallen on deaf ears."*

Mick gave evidence of the work he and his colleagues have done to address years of PFAS exposure, progress that was won "in spite of our respective governments and regulatory bodies". Mick spoke of the banning of PFAS foams by FRV, despite no legislative ban in force, and the development of a medical program to remove PFAS from blood, two programs that were developed despite pushback from governments, regulators and FRV management.

Mick presented with a focus on actions, outlining the reasons why he hasn't given up:

*"Nobody cares more about firefighter safety than firefighters do, because we're the ones on the end of the branch. None of these people—these supposed experts—have skin in the game. We do have skin in the game. We're sick of burying our mates.*

*And, at every one of those funerals we attend, there are never any politicians, ...regulators, there are never any of these supposed experts, and there are certainly no representatives of the chemical companies that should be held to account"*

#### Greg McConville - UFUA

Following Mick's evidence Greg McConville National Secretary spoke directly to the recommendations made by the UFUA in our submission and supplementary submission. Please refer to our submissions to read the recommendations.

Greg's evidence addressed the body of research concerning firefighter occupational exposures (including to PFAS) and cancer. Greg stated:

*"Through the WHO, firefighting has undergone some significant changes in classification. First, in 2010, there was an IARC monograph on firefighting, shiftwork and painting, and it said firefighting is possibly carcinogenic. In 2018 there was a very significant monograph on benzene... In 2023, the World Health Organization shifted its classification of firefighting ...to group 1, definitely carcinogenic to humans."*

Importantly, Greg guided the Committee through some of that language used by the World Health Organisation International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) in respect of carcinogenicity, with specific reference to the term 'limited evidence of carcinogenicity'. He explains:

*"Be aware of anyone who says, 'Oh, there's only limited evidence.' It's not only limited evidence. ...The term ...is often misconstrued"*

IARC defines 'limited evidence' as "a positive association has been observed between ... the agent and cancer for which a causal interpretation is considered ... to be credible, but chance, bias or confounding could not be ruled out with reasonable confidence." Greg explained:

*What that means in practical terms is that limited evidence is as close as you can get to something being conclusive without it being conclusive. It's so close to being definite."*

The need to keep abreast of research on PFAS and its health effects, along with emerging methods of PFAS remediation added weight to our recommendation to establish a tripartite body to guide interventions.

Wes Garret (Branch Secretary) and Jay Aspros (WHS Representative) – UFU Aviation Branch

The Aviation Branch representatives gave evidence of the shocking circumstances that resulted in firefighters at Avalon airport drinking water contaminated with high levels of PFAS. The Committee members were clearly stunned and shocked by this evidence: even more so when it was revealed that there has been no permanent resolution of the issue since it was identified in 2024, and drinking water continues to be transported to the airport!

Jay gave evidence of the uncertainty he and his colleagues felt when they found out about the water contamination, and evidence of Airservices Australia dragging their feet to address this issue. Jay stated:

*I can personally attest to the stress, anxiety and fear that Avalon staff and I felt when we were advised that we'd been drinking, bathing in and washing in water that had PFAS levels 44 times higher than the human health guidelines. ...What caused and is still causing the most stress and anxiety is the fact that we have no information of the following: exactly what we've been ingesting, how long this has been occurring for, how the chemical got into our drinking water and where the excessive levels of contamination were coming from. Despite repeated attempts to ask Airservices management and Avalon Airport, this information was not forthcoming. To this day, these unknowns still remain, nearly three years on now.*

You can read the full Hansard Report [linked here](#), or listen to the hearing via the Australian Parliament House YouTube channel [linked here](#).

**Questions on Notice**

A number of questions on notice were asked of the UFUA representatives, including about workers compensation arrangements related to PFAS exposure. In answer, the UFUA National Office provided three case studies on the difficulty firefighters face in obtaining workers compensation: even where presumptive legislation applies. The Questions on Notice and Answers are linked here for: [UFUA responses](#) and [FRV responses](#). UFU Aviation responses should soon be available on the Committee website.

**Next Steps**

The UFUA will continue to engage with the Committee process, as well as other National and International forums.

As we continue to push for reform, our wishes are perfectly articulated by the closing remarks from Mick Tisbury.

*"We keep getting people saying, 'Thank you for your service.' Every time there's a bushfire or a major chemical job, there's a conga line of polities wanting a photo opportunity, especially around election time. **We don't want your thanks; we're begging for your help.**"*

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*Authorised by Greg McConville, National Secretary, United Firefighters Union of Australia, Canberra.*