

## Action on fire plan will take time

Mathew Dunckley

The Victorian government has given in-principle support to all 51 interim recommendations from the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission, but not all responses will be fully implemented by the time the fire season starts.

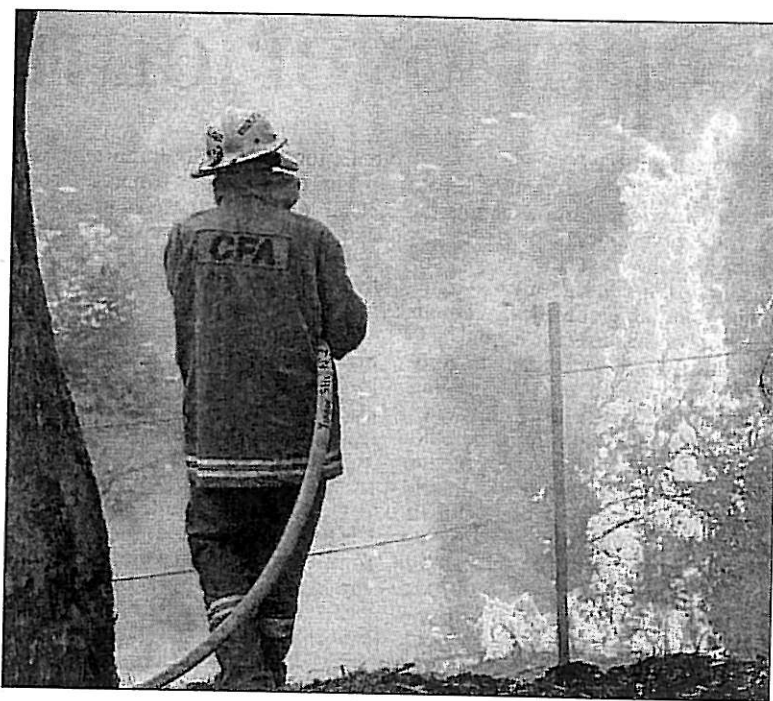
In its interim report earlier this month the commission recommended changes to the state's "stay or go" policy, improved warning systems, a revamped fire danger index, the establishment of community refuges and a review of fire policies for schools and councils.

Mr Brumby said the government supported all the recommendations but was guided by its emergency service agencies about what steps could practically be taken ahead of the bushfire season, which is just 56 days away.

"What happened on February 7 obviously changed the rule book, it threw out all of the rules and what we need is a new, stronger and more aggressive approach . . . to tackling fire in our state," Mr Brumby said.

Some of the recommendations, such as the system of alerts sent to mobile phones, involved other levels of government and Mr Brumby said Victoria would work to see those proposals implemented.

One such proposal was the



The Victorian government has approved more funding for firefighters. Photo: PAT SCALA

Australasian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council's work on a new warning rating system.

"There's going to be a greater emphasis on going early, so you would make it very clear that this is a very bad day which is coming up and if you're going, you make sure you're going early," Mr Brumby said.

"So you could have something that says: low, medium, high, extreme, code red, and a code red would be a day like a February 7, those most extreme days."

The government has also committed to more funding for the Country Fire Authority, more

firefighters and a \$56 million upgrade to the emergency call centre network.

But Mr Brumby conceded some measures, such as the establishment of safer places or "last resort" refuges for communities, could take longer to implement.

The government will provide a full implementation plan to the royal commission by the end of the month.

Opposition Leader Ted Baillieu said the coalition supported all of the commission's findings and that they could "very much" be implemented in time for this year's fire season.

## State sues water firm for millions

Mathew Dunckley

The South Australian government is suing one of Australia's biggest water companies for tens of millions of dollars, claiming taxpayers have paid far more than necessary to United Water International to maintain Adelaide's water infrastructure.

The action was launched in the state's Supreme Court yesterday and claims United Water misled the government during contract negotiations in 2001.

United Water is a subsidiary of French infrastructure giant Veolia and was awarded a 15 year contract to manage and operate Adelaide's water and wastewater systems in 1996.

According to the statement of claim lodged with the court yesterday, the government alleges that during a renegotiation of the contract with SA Water, which began under the previous Liberal government in 2001 and was completed by the current government in 2003, the company had demanded more money because it was failing to make a sufficient return.

United Water had produced documentation showing it was making only a 1.2 per cent profit compared with an expected return of 15 per cent.

The government now claims that the costs presented by United were overstated as they included activities not covered by the contract and overheads associated with United's

business throughout Australasia, not just South Australia.

It argues that this was misleading and deceptive conduct as well as a breach of contract and is demanding the excess funds be repaid.

Acting Premier Kevin Foley said the situation had only become apparent recently during pricing negotiations. He estimated the damages claim could be "in the order of tens of millions of dollars".

"SA Water considers this to be a serious and significant matter and is seeking to ensure the terms of the contract are complied with in the interests of South Australia," he said.

Mr Foley said the court proceedings should not affect the day-to-day running of the contract.

Opposition finance spokesman Rob Lucas said if there were shortcomings in the contract or its oversight, then the government needed to accept its role in ticking off the agreement in 2003 and not blame the previous administration.

United Water said it had worked closely with SA Water to serve the Adelaide community and was seeking clarification of the claim. "United Water is surprised and disappointed at this decision," it said.

The company also pledged to maintain service standards despite the court action.

A spokesman for SA Water declined to comment.