

MEDIA RELEASE – EMBARGOED UNTIL MIDDAY 23 SEPTEMBER 2008

ICEPACK COOLSTORE – TRAGEDY WAITING TO HAPPEN

“Some very serious issues need to be urgently addressed”, said Derek Best, Secretary of the N.Z. Firefighters Union, commenting on the N.Z. Fire Service’s Inquiry into the explosion and fire at Icepack Coolstore, Tamahere on 5 April 2008.

“The Report notes the extraordinary and heroic actions of the first attending Firefighters and the competence and sound action of subsequently responding Firefighters – this despite the knowledge of the death of Senior Station Officer Derek Lovell and the very serious injuries suffered by others of the first responding Firefighters”, said Derek Best.

“However, the Report clearly establishes that the Icepack Coolstore was a disaster waiting to happen. It is extraordinary that such an establishment containing at least 400kg of a highly flammable and potentially explosive gas could exist without:

- The Fire Service being notified;
- No signage on the building;
- No evacuation plan in place;
- No water supply for fire fighting;
- No compliant alarm system;
- No odouriser/stenching agent in the refrigeration gas.” said Derek Best

“Of additional concern is the Report’s comment that there is one other large Coolstore installation in New Zealand using highly flammable and potentially explosive refrigeration gas. Given the circumstances surrounding the existence of the Icepack Coolstore, no one really knows whether or not there could be more.”

“In any event, where is the other Coolstore identified in the Report”? Derek Best asked.

The Report also highlights the inconsistencies and difficulties that occur because of the artificial delineation of the country between Urban and Rural Fire control.

Many people would be surprised that they do not live within a prescribed Urban Fire District where the Fire Service (both career and volunteer firefighters) have the direct and indirect responsibility to respond to emergency incidents. The Icepack Coolstore is located only 12 kilometres from the centre of Hamilton and yet it is outside of the Hamilton Fire District. As it was in a Rural Fire District, the primary duty to respond to this fire/explosion was with the Principal Rural Fire Officer.

“The Hamilton Fire Brigade, in terms of the Fire Service Act, was not obliged to attend the incident. This is a totally unsatisfactory situation in 2008 and must be urgently addressed by Parliament”, Derek Best said.

“If nothing is urgently done to properly address the serious inadequacies in the legislation/regulatory framework that presently exists, then we will all have learned nothing from this tragedy.

There would be an inevitability that history will repeat itself with another Coolstore explosion, and this would be unforgivable”, Derek Best concluded.

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