

Disaster Management and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2024

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Submission to Parliamentary Committee

Disaster Management and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2024

The Disaster Management and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2024 introduces new eligibility requirements for all Senior Officers employed by Queensland Fire and Rescue. These new requirements include very specific professional firefighting, incident control and fire prevention experience, explicitly defined in the Bill.

At present there are eight Scientific Officers employed as Senior Officers and appointed as Fire Service Officers under Section 25 of the Fire and Emergency Services Act 1990. There are 1 Chief Superintendent and 7 Inspectors, with an average tenure of 18 years. Since the requirements of the Disaster Management and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2024 apply to all Senior Officers within the new Queensland Fire and Rescue, each and every one of the currently serving Scientific Officers will be displaced from our employment on commencement of the Act.

Scientific Officers form the professional scientific core of Fire and Rescue. We are directly recruited with tertiary qualifications in chemistry or chemical engineering, are required to have a broad scientific knowledge, and are trained to develop a particular emphasis on chemical hazards and emergency management of hazardous materials incidents. Since Scientific Officers operate as specialists, we are not required to develop expertise in some of the other aspects of professional firefighting, incident control or fire prevention as defined in the Bill.

Scientific Officers need to remain within the frontline response of Queensland Fire and Rescue. We participate in entry operations alongside firefighters, don protective clothing and breathing apparatus, operate advanced scientific equipment, and provide technical expertise in hazardous environments. We therefore have and require the powers of an authorised fire officer to undertake our operational duties, including:

- Entering secured and unsecured premises/vehicles;
- Opening receptacles (e.g. chemical containers, official mail/packages etc) to test contents;
- Damaging receptacles to test contents;
- Bringing fire service equipment onto premises to test items/things;
- Destroying, damaging, removing or otherwise dealing with materials or substances, for example:
 - Neutralising hazardous chemicals
 - Destroying contaminated items
 - Retrieving samples of forensic evidence for further off-site testing by Queensland Health or Queensland Police Service
 - Directing removal of secured chemical containers
- Participating in the decontamination of people and objects such as forensic evidence; and
- Requiring a person to answer questions.

So what does Queensland stand to lose if the eight Scientific Officers are no longer eligible to be employed in their positions? When firefighters need operational support in safely managing a chemical spill or other hazardous material incident, 24/7, they contact us. This includes incidents such as:

- Hazardous materials incidents in industry, affecting product manufacture and supply of critical services;

- Chemical spills at airports, shipping ports and along rail lines and major highways throughout Queensland – these interrupt transportation of people and freight supply chains for days if not mitigated efficiently;
- Childcare centres, hospitals or the general public concerned about chemical smells of unknown origin;
- Major structural fires sending toxic smoke plumes across the surrounding suburbs – Scientific Officers are the ones who measure air contamination and provide the community with advice on whether to evacuate;
- Lithium-ion battery fires (large and small), which pose an increasing threat to the community
- Abandoned, unlabeled chemical containers, which must have their contents identified by us before they can be moved and safely disposed of;
- Assistance to other agencies when they encounter a situation that involves hazardous materials (for example, Queensland Ambulance Service and Queensland Health in managing cases of chemical poisoning, Queensland Police Service if they encounter toxic or explosive chemicals in the course of their investigations); and
- Major disasters, as events such as floods and cyclones create secondary hazardous materials incidents.

In addition to technical expertise on resolving these incidents, we provide on-scene risk assessments to emergency services personnel regarding safety from exposure to toxic chemical hazards. We also have important roles in providing specialist training to firefighters and other emergency responders, reviewing the emergency plans for businesses that manufacture, store and use significant quantities of chemicals, and making sure that the procedures and equipment used by firefighters to manage chemical incidents are safe and effective in the face of changing technology.

How often are we called on for operational support? Since the beginning of 2024, QFES Scientific Officers have been involved in the safe resolution of 15 – 23 incidents *per week*. That is approximately 1000 incidents per year.

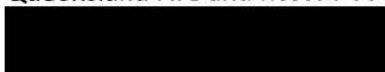
One of the most upsetting aspects of this is that QFES employees were assured time and again that there would be zero job losses from the restructure to Queensland Fire Department, and as Scientific Officers we specifically were told that there would be no changes affecting us whatsoever. Yet the current Bill contains no “carve-out” of the new eligibility requirements with respect to our specialist roles. There is also no “grandfathering” clause for existing senior officers in the Disaster Management and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2024 (in contrast to senior executives, as per Section 225). However, introduction of an equivalent clause would only form a partial solution, as the provision would not be extended to any future prospective Scientific Officer (for example, recruited to replace a resigning or retiring existing Scientific Officer).

We urge you to reconsider the wording of the Bill, to make sure that the new Queensland Fire and Rescue continues to include the current Scientific Officers in its frontline response capability.



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