

Disaster Management and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2024

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Submission to the Community Safety and Legal Affairs Committee

Related to: The Disaster Management and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2024

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Introduction

The following has been compiled by a husband and wife team of Rural Fire Service (RFS) volunteers, who, after each spending 11.5 years in their brigade, fear that some of what is contained in the above-noted Amendment Bill will drive volunteers away from their local brigades, rendering the already weakened volunteering model unsustainable in the face of ever-changing climate.

Between them, these two very active volunteers have attended hundreds of fires and other incidents, and each occupies more than one position in their rural fire brigade:

- First Officer (over nine years).
- Second Officer (over eight years).
- Treasurer (over ten years).
- Secretary (over eight years).
- Fire Warden (over six years).

The Issue

The Amendment appears to grant the Commissioner of the Queensland Fire Department (QFD) the following powers:

1. [Draft page 29] Amendment of Section 81: Regardless that members of a rural fire brigade may elect any member of the brigade to be the chairperson, secretary or treasurer of the brigade, **the commissioner may dismiss the person from the office and/or disqualify the person from holding any office** with a rural fire brigade.
2. [Draft page 47] Under new chapter 6, part 4, Transitional Provisions: A person who was a member of a rural fire brigade immediately before the commencement continues as a member of the rural fire brigade until **the Commissioner terminates the appointment of the person as a member** of the rural fire brigade.

With the inclusion of these powers in the Amendment, the two authors of this submission do NOT support the bill.

Reasoning

Rural fire brigades are community organisations comprised of members of the community, with a common goal of keeping the community safe. They are voted in as new members

through resolutions by the brigade's members. They are voted into office positions through resolutions by the brigade's members.

These are neighbours. They are people who know each other, work with each other, visit with each other, and share the goal of protecting each other's life and property. They are farmers, teachers, politicians, mechanics, unemployed, and retired. Some cannot read or write. Some are expert at practical skills. But nonetheless they are welcomed into their community brigade, because everyone has something that they can offer their community.

Everyone.

They joined a club. They never joined QFD. They never joined the Rural Fire Service Queensland (RFSQ). They joined a local community organisation with nothing more than the safety of their community in mind. Local members of the community should decide who joins them, and who holds offices in their club, not someone from Brisbane, or his/her delegate. Local members of the community should decide to terminate members when this may be required, not someone from Brisbane, or his/her delegate.

Is there even a precedent for a public servant to be granted the power to moderate the membership of an unincorporated association within the local community?

In 1990, when local brigades came under the Fire and Rescue Service, the Minister at that time, Mr Mackenroth, advised Parliament that areas outside Brisbane would have a voice in the fire services, and that there would be no concentration of power in the city. The regions would retain their autonomy.

This Amendment, with these powers granted to the Commissioner, runs contra to Mr Mackenroth's advice. Why should the Commissioner hold the power to terminate a member of a rural fire brigade, or to determine the positions that member can and cannot hold? These decisions should remain within the brigade.

This bill's sponsor, Hon Nikki Boyd MP, describes it as necessary for the Commissioner to have this power, to remove 'inappropriate' members. Not all volunteers may be 'appropriate', but by extension, neither are all staff members of QFD. Yet volunteers will have no mechanism in this Amendment to deal with 'inappropriate' staff members. Even staff in the present-day QFES choose not to follow their existing complaints management process to deal with 'inappropriate' situations, as they feel this process does not work. What then, are volunteers to do?

The two authors of this submission have been advised by senior staff in the existing RFSQ, that these powers would be used 'very rarely', yet similar results have been obtained only recently by RFSQ staff when they dissolved a brigade, released the volunteers, then re-established a new brigade afterwards.

The two authors of this submission put it to the Community Safety and Legal Affairs Committee that if these powers are to be used rarely, then **remove these powers entirely from the Amendment**, and continue following their practice of dissolution, release, and re-

establishment, only when deemed absolutely necessary, and only after all other options have been considered. After all, giving staff these powers over volunteers, over time, may lead to a 'stacking of the deck', where these community organisations are drawn towards supporting QFD, and away from the communities they sprang from. Hardly the utopia described in 1990 by Mr Mackenroth.

Why try to fix what is not broken? Has anyone actually looked into the ramifications of granting these powers to the Commissioner? By effectively bringing rural fire brigades into the fire service through moderating their membership, does QFD, specifically RFSQ, have the financial and human resources to support this, given that their main role should be to support the administration and operations of the volunteers in these brigades? Will brigades be restricted even in how they can procure assets, by being required to follow state processes and standards? This is opening up a whole new range of issues, and again the authors ask, why try to fix what is not broken?

The volunteer model has already been significantly weakened as RFS volunteer numbers dropped from 35,000 to 26,500 with the recent Blue Card implementation. The two authors of this submission fear that not removing these powers from the Amendment will result in a further massive drop in RFS volunteer numbers, at a time when climate predictions show a worrying rise in the number and intensity of wildfires. And no one wants to see their communities negatively impacted by fire.

In the Bundaberg area during the most recent fire season, RFS volunteers were stretched far more than they had been, ever. The brigade of the authors of this submission attended incidents a record 140 times during 2023. This brigade's previous record was 99, in 2018. It is not difficult to imagine, that even lower volunteer numbers throughout Queensland's 1,400 brigades will only worsen the situation, when climate predictions are worrying, leading to serious health and safety issues, death, and significant loss of property.

No one wants that.

Summary

There is no doubt that granting the Commissioner these powers to moderate the membership of RFS volunteers will lead to some very difficult times in Queensland, with even lower RFS volunteer numbers. Please do the right thing and remove these powers entirely from the Amendment.

Submitted by:

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Passionate, dedicated, and very active RFS Volunteers

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