

Disaster Management and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2024

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Submission to the Community Safety and Legal Affairs Committee Inquiry into the Disaster Management and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2024

I am a Volunteer with the Samford Rural Fire Brigade and a member of the management committee, who has concerns about the negative impact that the proposed changes in this Bill will have on Rural Fire Brigades and volunteers in Queensland. Under the existing legislation Brigades and volunteers operate under the legal and operational umbrella provided by QFES. At times this can be problematic when your Brigade does not receive the operational and logistics support promised from your area office. Despite these frustrations, the saving grace has been that we are self-managed community brigades serving our communities.

QFES, despite having had a long working relationship with volunteers, still equates volunteers as part of its workforce, it does not understand what motivates volunteers to give their time freely to help communities at risk. We do not do it to serve the State. Unlike QFES, volunteer firefighters view themselves as being professional rural firefighters, volunteers are well trained and led by experienced officers. In our Brigade, like many others, we have members who have served actively for decades. Volunteers do not work rostered shifts like their urban counterparts. Volunteers at our Brigade are on call 24/7 to respond to incidents whether they be fire or road traffic accidents. When we attend a bushfire, members can be on the fireground for 12 hours or more (we do not get paid overtime).

I spent twenty-five years in the Queensland Public Service in senior policy roles and worked on numerous legislation review and development projects. It was customary to prepare a public discussion paper (Green Paper) when undertaking a major policy review to underpin the consultation process. Given the lack of consultation of any sort with Rural Brigades, members, and communities over the proposed changes it is obvious that QFES felt that its reforms were of little consequence. These changes will be adversely impacting the whole community dynamic that has underpinned the operation of Rural Brigades since the 1940's. This may be of little consequence to QFES; however, it is a significant shift in policy from the Rural Fire Volunteer perspective.

QFES has presented the proposed reforms as actions that will improve the position of rural fire brigades and volunteers and address any lingering questions over brigade legal status. The question of brigade legal status has been previously explained and required no further clarification in legislation. The unresolved issue is what powers under the Act do rural firefighters have the authority to apply when responding to an incident. The current answer is next to none, and the Bill does not address this shortfall. Brigade members need to have the same powers as an Authorised Fire Officer when responding to an incident. At present the only brigade member who can temporarily have the power of an Authorised Fire Officer is a First Officer while in charge of an incident. Note the First Officer is not an Authorised Fire Officer for that period, the First Officer only has the powers of an Authorised Fire Officer. This situation is ridiculous and needs to be urgently resolved to enable volunteers to effectively do their work.

There are other issues that I should comment on, but time constraints prevent it. I do not support the Bill and the retrograde actions proposed by QFES. The unilateral approach taken to push these amendments through is of major concern. The Bill needs to be withdrawn and more comprehensive consultation needs to be undertaken with those most impacted – the Rural Fire Volunteers.

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John Stalker

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14 March 2024