

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 Fergus Adrian and I thank the Community Safety and Legal Affairs Committee for the opportunity to provide my submission.

I have been an active volunteer in my Rural Fire Brigade (RFB) for forty-three (43) years, serving my community with passion. During the time I have had various Officer positions and currently I am the brigade appointed First Officer with over 12 years' experience in the demanding and rewarding role. I have also retired from the QFES following nineteen (19) years of employment as a fire officer in the Rural Fire Service. During my 43 years I have witnessed many reviews and changes to the fire service some of which have had positive outcomes for the RFB volunteers however some review outcomes have been detrimental to the progression of RFB volunteers and the safety of their respective communities.

While the KPMG review provided sobering information including many favourable outcomes for the RFB volunteers there is yet to be a position that supports such positive outcome. The Disaster Management and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2024 (the Bill) is an example of an attempt to support and protect volunteers and advance the new Queensland Fire Department however it falls dramatically short of the respect and value towards RFB volunteers in its intent and contents.

The Bill has introduced a closed and directed overtone of systemic appointment processes that can contribute to poor strategic and deficient contemporary leadership over a diverse fire department. There would be a very limited number of persons capable to meet all descriptors of positions especially with latest practioner ability at a strategic level in dynamic bushfire protection and mitigation.

The current industrial bias and funding arrangement will always impact on rural fire brigades leading to the under valuing and utilisation of volunteers, local knowledge and community and industry-based response resources. A data driven organisation will use such data as a mechanism to influence the organisational structure and resources towards an ineffective built environment model responding into dynamic rural fire environments.

The Government and the proposed Queensland Fire Department cannot provide a full-time paid fire service to the land and island mass geographic area of Queensland nor can Queenslanders afford to pay for a full-time paid fire service to cover all of the State. The *Fire and Emergency Services Act 1990* reflects this in the Acts intent. This framework in the Act has been practiced successfully since 1927.

Volunteer rural fire brigades are a necessity in rural areas even in areas where there exists built villages and regional towns with some being remote. Volunteer Fire Wardens throughout the State provide fire preparation and planning advice as well as fire safety.

Rural fire brigades were and still are formed based on land-use, industry, geographical size, social demographics and access, community coordination and cooperation and resource/type availability and more. The population involved identified the need for protection of and response to fire and natural disaster events at the community owned level.

Communities are dynamic with population alternating and values changing through generations. Rural fire brigades are at the forefront of this experience and are the primary managers in the number and location of its membership needed to fulfill the PPRR and first responder emergency response and support to the community. Rural fire brigades always require fit for purpose and risk identified appliances, firefighting resources and or equipment.

The Bill gives extreme power to the Commissioner in deciding the membership make-up of the brigade including who can be a member, number of persons, their individual role in the brigade and the role of the brigade. Having the Commissioner or delegate indicate the **number** and **deployment** of rural fire brigade members is an inditement on the integrity, trust and respect of the community and importantly the membership of the entity being a rural fire brigade.

The KPMG report Independent Review of Queensland Emergency Services 2021 summary of benchmark report table 3-9 page 82 identifies the absolute low cost of Queensland Rural Fire Brigade volunteers expense per capita at \$10. By comparison, New South Wales and Victoria demonstrated volunteer expenditure that is approximately 10 times greater per capita, while South Australia's volunteer expenditure is around five times greater.

The Queensland Fire and Rescue has the highest FRS expense per capita of \$130. This is up to 55% above Victoria and South Australia, and 23% above New South Wales.

These example shows the value the QFES has for its RFB volunteer's who provides services to communities over a land mass area the size greater than NSW, ACT, Victoria, Tasmania and part of SA combined.

As I mentioned I am the First Officer of a very active and proficient brigade. We have approximately 55 operational volunteer firefighters and approximately 15 other support volunteers. The community we support has approximately 3500 properties with a village shopping centre, schools and various community groups we interact with. The area is over 90 sq.km. with 60% in an identified bushfire prone hazard area. Collectively the brigade commits more than 4,600 hours of planning, preparation, response and recovery hours to its community annually. During 2023 the brigade contributed over 6,000 hours.

Being responsible and in-charge of a Rural Fire Brigade as per the Act involves many hours of commitment, understanding and application of leadership and motivation, knowledge of individual attributes of brigade members, social aspects and politics of the community, let alone approximately seventy-six (76) pages of the Act, more than 300 pages of the Rural Fire Brigade manual and more than 200 pages of operational policy and guidelines, oh we cannot miss alone the complete training regime. There is an enormous amount of responsibility placed on the First Officer more so than most permanent paid fire officers in the QFES/RFS Departments.

Generally, First Officers are very competent in their role as Incident Controllers and the need for the Commissioner to override the legislative arrangement certainly demonstrates the under valuing of the volunteer, their attributes, and for that matter a total disregard for QFES shared values of Respect. Integrity. Courage. Loyalty and Trust.

There are components of the Bill that are required to move ahead however there are many sections pertaining to the Rural Fire Brigades that require change to eliminate ambiguity, covert opportunity and autocratic bureaucracy.

There is the strong possibility that a centrally controlled management of the Rural Fire Brigades may disconnect the brigade from its community, the primary reason why rural fire brigades exist in the first instance. Rural Fire Brigades and Fire Wardens engage in their communities more so than they do with the QFES or RFS.

The Committee has the opportunity to change the legislation and give greater value to the volunteers by allowing volunteer rural fire brigades and fire wardens more autonomy, greater funding, fit for purpose resources and support in legislative protection, mental and physical health.

I do sincerely thank the Committee for the time to digest the contents of the submission and would welcome the opportunity to be asked questions on this matter.

Kind Regards



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