

Disaster Management and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2024

Submission No: 45
Submitted by: Ian Swadling
Publication: Making the submission and your name public
Attachments: See attachment
Submitter Comments:

I am a volunteer Rural Firefighter of 34 plus years experience of working as a operational firefighter, trainer, administrator and leader with the Villeneuve Brigade.

This Brigade encompasses a service area of approximately 1400 square kilometres in area being a mixture of steep hills, river flats, and grassed slopes. There are a number of rural acreage estates of varying sizes, grazing properties having a number of dwellings and outbuildings of both large and small sizes, small industrial/commercial establishments, a school, and State Forest areas.

I have worked on the extinguishment of hundreds of fires from small 10 sq. m. fires, and fires over 10 sq. km. and more, involving many dwellings and other buildings under threat. Also taken part in interstate and intrastate deployments.

I have been very committed to the Rural Fire service and am the past First Officer of this Brigade for over 30 of those years of service.

I reject the provisions relating to the Rural Fire Service Queensland of the Disaster Management and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2024 on the following grounds.

1, The Queensland Rural Fire Brigades are born of the community having first been instituted in 1865 from the Prevent the Careless Use of Fire Act 1865. From this act sprung the banding together of rural landholders to protect themselves and their Communities. This resulted in the introduction of the Rural Fires Act 1927. This led to them being named Bush Fire Brigades. The first Brigade officially formed after the interval of WW II, was the Glasshouse Mountains Brigade formed in 1949. Since then the number of Brigades has grown to 1,394.

This is how far back the COMMUNITY aspect of Brigades has been embedded in the culture of the RFSQ. This Bill will totally remove the Community from the RFSQ by giving total power over it to the Commissioner and his staff.

This is illustrated in the "Explanatory Notes" to the Bill where it states- "Consolidating the power of the Commissioner to direct certain persons under the FS Act". under the current act, as bad and faulty as it is, the Commissioner has no power or authority over Brigades or a Brigade Committee. This act will place all Brigade members and the Brigade Committees under the authority of the Commissioner. This is a very bad, retrograde outcome of this act, and will remove the Community from Brigades.

2. This Act is not what was stated by the Minister Ryan in his announcement on the 26th of October 23, where he stated that there would be a "Rural Fire Service as a separate entity with its own dedicated budget", with its own advisory Board empowered to influence the directions and development to manage and improve the capability of the Rural Fire Service. The Act states "To remove any doubt, it is declared that the RFS advisory committee is not a decision-making body".

This is not what was promised to us by the Minister of the time.

3. The Definitions section defines Incident Control Expertise as having a knowledge and practical experience in the control of-

- (a) incidents of large-scale structural fires and bushfires; and
- (b) incidents involving hazardous materials; and
- (c) specialist technical rescues; and
- (d) responses to disasters.

These requirements will preclude all Rural volunteers and the majority of RFSQ staff from performing the duties of Incident controllers as they currently do because they do not train or take part in these fire categories.

This will mean the only persons permitted to be ICs at bushfires to be Urban trained officers.

4. New section 83A "Appointment of person in charge". This section allows the Commissioner to appoint any person in charge of operations at his behest. A blanket Standing Order will be all that is required to delegate the Commissioner's authority to all urban fire Officers. This will enable urban officers that arrive on a scene after a rural officer has established control of an incident, to take over control of the incident, and direct the rural officer to carry out other duties that the urban officer may direct. This is taking over control from the Officers that live in the area and have years, sometimes decades of how fires travel and behave in the area. This is not available to Officers from an urban culture or background.

5. The sole purpose of this bad draft Act is to establish total control by the Commissioner and his senior Officers to totally control the Rural Fire Service and the volunteers to make them totally subservient to their directions. The Commissioner, and his delegates the senior Officers will be able to sack a volunteer at any time. This is not an authority that is currently available to him under the existing Act. The Commissioner will be also able to place any person that he wishes in place in any Brigade to carry out certain functions that he designates.

6. It has been the aim of the F&R service to fully take over the Rural Fire Service since the introduction of the Fire Service Act of 1990.

This bad draft Act will fully enable that outcome to the extreme detriment of the Rural Fire Service, its thousands of dedicated, capable volunteers, and the community holistically.

7. There are many other sections in this bill that are also detrimental to the Rural volunteers. It would be a much larger submission if I were to delineate them all by written word.

I would welcome the opportunity to give evidence in person to the Committee to further describe the failings in this bill as I see them.

I therefore request that this Committee recommend that all amendments to the current Fire Service Act 1990 be dismissed ahead of a full legislative rewrite following the 2024 Queensland state election.