

Disaster Management and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2024

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GENERAL POSITION

I appreciate the Government commitment to the review in general, and the principle of restructuring the provision of emergency services, delivered by volunteers. However, I am disappointed, that the Government appears to not understand or value what, Rural Fire Service volunteers were seeking from the review.

I worked at a Senior Executive level in the Queensland Emergency Service Department in the early 1990's. I have been a volunteer in a Rural Fire Brigade (Stanmore & District) for approximately 18 years. Over that time, I have been an Officer, and was Chairman of our Brigade for approximately 10 years. I have developed extensive contacts within the Queensland Rural Fire Service, including South West Queensland and South East Queensland. The views I express are shared across Rural Fire Brigade Volunteers.

In summary, the legislation proposed, relating to the Rural Fire Service, does not align with the promises of the Queensland Government and expectations of Rural Fire Service volunteers. It does not provide independence for Rural Fire Service Volunteers and seeks to weaken rather than strengthen the Community focus of Rural Fire Brigades.

It would concentrate all power with the Commissioner. It ignores and denigrates the community focus of Brigades, from which the Rural Fire Service emerged. If this current legislation is enacted, I believe volunteers will progressively leave Rural Fire Service and Rural Fire Service Committees will lose interest and focus.

BACKGROUND

In the early 1990's the Labour Government appreciated that volunteers, particularly Rural Fire and the State Emergency Service (SES) had significant influence and needed to be supported. During that period, I worked at Senior Executive Service level within the Department of Emergency Services (encompassing Queensland Fire and Rescue Service, Queensland Ambulance, Marine Rescue and SES). Substantial progress was made for the Rural Fire Service, under the Hon. Minister Tom Burns, Director General Leo Keliher and Commissioner Geoff Skerritt. There was a position of Deputy Commissioner Rural Fire appointed, and state funding for the provision of Rural Fire Appliances.

It is from this initiative yellow trucks emerged, as prior to this, brigades acquired and built their own trucks using tractors and trailers. Yet, there were NO amendments to the Fire Act to recognise Rural Fire Volunteers, or provide them with **independence, legal protection and industrial protection**. This was discussed at the time, however the Queensland Fire Service was not ready to accept such change.

Decades passed, and we had the Malone Review which brought more funding to the Rural Fire Service, and finally, the recent review which has resulted in this current legislation to be placed before Parliament.

THE UNDERTAKING OF GOVERNMENT

The current Labour Government under the Hon. Minister Mark Ryan, has undertaken a comprehensive review of Emergency Services. Volunteers within Rural Fire Service have appreciated his honesty, listening behaviour and integrity. From a Rural Fire Service perspective,

the volunteers were seeking **recognition** within the Fire Act, **independence** of operations, for our **community based** and **focused service**.

It needs to be remembered and clearly understood that Rural Fire Brigades emerged from the community. They were and still are community brigades and have a substantial voice. During the course of the review, all indications were that, finally, Rural Fire Service Volunteers would be recognised as an **independent body**, and have operational independence, while working in partnership with Queensland Fire Service, National Parks and others, to manage Rural Fire Emergencies.

THE CURRENT LEGISLATION

Sadly, the current legislation, as it impacts on Rural Fire Service Volunteers, does not match the undertakings given by the Government. Indeed, rather than empowering the Community Fire Brigades, it denudes their role and focus, and concentrates all power with the Queensland Fire Service Commissioner. This is simply unacceptable to the Rural Fire Service community and all of the volunteers. It is disappointing that the Hon. Mark Ryan has left the portfolio and a new minister appointed.

It is unclear what the role and authority of the Rural Fire Service Chief Officer position as this position is closely embedded in the Queensland Fire Service structure, philosophy and culture. Moreover, structures can change and the proposed Legislation fails the volunteers and weakens Community Rural Fire Brigades.

THE SOLUTION

The legislation is broad and extensive but with a few specific inclusions will meet the needs and expectations of Rural Fire Volunteers. Please give consideration to including the following within the proposed legislation:

1. Specifically identify the Rural Fire Service as a body contributing to fire protection across rural Queensland
2. Clarify and clearly define the position the Rural Fire Service holds within the Queensland Fire Department
3. Recognise Rural Fire Volunteers, provide legal protection and outline their role under the Act
4. Outline the authority of the community Rural Fire Brigade executive committees including the Chairperson, Treasurer, Secretary and First Officer
5. Define and protect the powers of the Chief Rural Fire Officer
6. Outline the role of the advisory board working to the Chief Rural Fire Officer

There are approximately 35,000 Rural Fire Service Volunteers, who all live in fringe Metropolitan, Remote, Regional and Rural areas. They all have family and extensive community contacts and support. Our voice must be heard.

Thank you to the committee for taking the time to consider this position.

Michael Tiley, Second Officer, Stanmore and District Rural Fire Brigade