

Bingera Weir Rural Fire Brigade
PO Box 5444
Bundaberg QLD 4670
06 August 2015

To the Finance and Administration Committee

A Submission relating to the: "Workers' Compensation and Rehabilitation and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2015"

I would like to make a submission on behalf of the Bingera Weir Rural Fire Brigade regarding the Workers' Compensation and Rehabilitation and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2015 introduced on the 15th July 2015. This submission has been approved by the Executive Committee.

This Brigade finds this legislation totally discriminatory and unfair towards all Rural Fire Fighters in Queensland. We offer the following information in support of this view.

Firstly, although no explanation has yet been given as to why an Urban or Auxiliary Fire Fighter only has to attend 1 fire and a Rural Fire Fighter has to attend 150 fires before being covered under this Legislation, one could assume that one of the reasons is the type of fires that each group attend? I suppose it could be argued that Structural and Vehicle fires are likely to emit more harmful fumes than vegetation fires. However there is no denying that all fires produce fumes which could be detrimental to ones' health. It should be noted though, that when Urban or Auxiliary Fire Fighters are working in close proximity to structural fires they are equipped with breathing apparatus to totally protect them from any dangerous fumes. At other times they have available to them full face masks with changeable canisters also designed to filter out dangerous fumes. At present all that Volunteer Fire Fighters are issued with are flimsy disposable paper nose/mouth dust masks which don't give very much protection at all and which certainly are not designed to filter out chemical fumes. It is a fact that Rural Fire Fighters are called upon to back up the red trucks at structural fires to supply water where there is no reticulated supply. Likewise we are often called to assist at vehicle fires. Records show that during the 2014/2015 Financial Year, Rural Fire Fighters attended 8 motor vehicle fires and 5 structural fires in the Bundaberg Area alone.

Furthermore, when conducting back burning to control a fire, Rural Fire Fighters performing that role are necessarily on the leeward side of the fire, exposed to constant often extremely dense smoke with visibility of just metres for hours on end. Similar conditions are involved in some controlled burning also. Just this Saturday gone I personally was exposed to these conditions during a controlled burn at Belle Eden Estate, Bundaberg, as were the other members of my crew. This is a common occurrence.

Rural Fire Fighters commonly conduct roadside burning to protect properties and to assist the Main Roads Department. On many such roads including the Isis Highway along which our Brigade does such burning in most years, the amount of litter is disgraceful, and includes many plastics and other materials which emit toxic fumes on combustion, again unavoidably exposing the fire fighters. This litter can include dumped car tyres and regularly tyre strips thrown off trucks.

The next point I would like to make to show how unfair the 150 attendances requirement is for Volunteers is this:

Red trucks attending structural fires are perhaps present at those fires for maybe 2, 3 or 4 hours perhaps of course sometimes even longer but still only a matter of a few hours. For vehicle fires, they are in attendance for usually a much shorter time. Vegetation fires, which Volunteers attend, can sometimes continue for weeks and each volunteer may attend on several occasions. Also each occasion could be 12 hours or more in duration and often are. So if you look at the requirements in time wise, a Full Time or Auxiliary fire fighter qualifies say after an average of 4 hours, worst case scenario maybe double that. A Volunteer Rural Fire Fighter on the other hand has to spend hundreds of hours with an absolute worst case scenario up to 1800 hours (150 attendances by 12 hours).

It is noted that the original Amendment Bill introduced to Parliament on 3 June 2015 and the accompanying speech specifically excluded any additional threshold criteria for Rural Firefighters, rather the 150 exposure incidents was introduced in the subsequent Amendment Bill on 15 July 2015.

It is understood that this discrimination is based on a Monash University study which indicated no higher disease incidence among Rural Firefighters. Whilst limited time and opportunity does not allow us to access and peruse that study, it seems very unlikely that it takes into account that the average Rural Firefighter is decades older than the average full or part-time firefighter, with a much shorter life span after retirement from firefighting, thereby distorting conclusions drawn and disadvantaging those rural firefighters who may develop such diseases.

As per the original Amendment Bill, the qualifying periods should be enough thresh hold.

It is this Brigades request that this Legislation be amended to give equal rights to our dedicated Volunteers. At the very least, if it is decided that the 150 attendance requirement will remain, please make a recommendation to amend it so that once a Volunteer has attended one structural fire or motor vehicle fire that the 150 attendances requirement be waived and that their coverage commences then and there like their counterparts on the red trucks.

Finally, on one radio interview the host asked the Minister how the number of 150 attendances was determined. It was stated that other States have used that number in the past so we should follow suit for consistency. It is this Brigades opinion that just because other States have enacted flawed Legislation why should we do it? Let this great State of Queensland stand up for itself and be the leaders in DOING THE RIGHT THING.

Yours sincerely,

Author: James Wilkinson
QRFS I/D Number 148070
2nd Officer
Bingera Weir Rural Fire Brigade

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