

## **Submission in regard to the *Workers' Compensation and Rehabilitation and Other Legislation Bill 2015***

The Glen Rural Fire Brigade has three concerns stemming from the Bill;

1. The discrimination between types of fire fighters; Permanent, Auxiliary and Rural Volunteer
2. The difficulty for volunteers to obtain the required 150 fires to be eligible for the compensation in the new schedules.
3. No indication of other potential exposure risks are identified or included in the amendment.

### Lack of fairness for volunteer fire fighters

The Bill discriminates between paid fire fighters and volunteers. By the nature of their work paid firefighters are placed into riskier situations, however to compensate, they are;

- a. Paid for their time while attending a fire
- b. Paid for their time while training in preparation to fight fires
- c. Have effective PPE which includes breathing apparatus
- d. Have access to ongoing training, follow-up training, training facilities and must maintain competencies

This means paid fire fighters are in a better position to understand the risks they face at every incident and are well protected therefore reducing the risk of exposure to carcinogens at an incident.

Volunteer fire fighters, by definition, are not paid to attend and as a result;

- a. Are not paid to undertake a risky occupation
- b. Have very limited training
- c. Are not required to maintain competencies
- d. Have lower quality PPE
- e. Have no access to breathing apparatus
- f. Have very limited exposure to trainers and training facilities

This results in Volunteer fire fighters being exposed to higher risks when attending incidents. The lack of breathing apparatus means they are at very high risk (or a higher risk?) of breathing airborne carcinogens when attending incidents.

Discrimination occurs through the fact both paid and volunteer firefighters regularly stand side by side at fires being exposed to the same carcinogens, however one is trained and well protected and the other is not and it is the unprotected fire fighter who will not be covered by compensation until they attend 150 fires.

Volunteer firefighters in rural areas attend and assist at vehicle fires and structural fires as well as bushfires. They are usually the first on scene and do what they can do to contain the situation until paid firefighters arrive. No one deliberately stands in the smoke and no one wants to stand in puddles of water but the wind direction can change or you might not see the puddles of water which may contain carcinogens.

The Glen RFB has also attended structural fires on rural properties, most of these fires have occurred in sheds. When we arrive at these fires there is generally no way of telling what chemicals are contained in the sheds. Carcinogens are just as likely, if not more so, to appear in rural areas due to the use of horticultural, agricultural, fungicides, insecticides and veterinary chemicals and

pesticides, including old stores of chemicals such as (now banned) organochlorines for crop protection and animal health.

Atrazine and simazine are the second and third most highly used chemicals in Australia, using approximately 3,000 tonnes/year. These are used for the control of many broadleaf weeds and grasses in forestry and agricultural crops due to their residual action. Every rural firefighter will be exposed to these chemicals and their effects at almost every fire. There are also organophosphates which are used primarily in agriculture including endosulphan, dimeathoate, chlorpyrifos and diazinon, all carcinogenic in their own right and which require breathing apparatus, elbow-length gloves and chemical protective overalls when used. Over 5,000 tonnes of these active ingredients are used in Australia, in rural areas, annually.

Further to all the above chemicals in use in rural areas, there is also the situation of termite control in rural buildings, due to a larger prevalence of 'white ants' in the rural environment and the residual effects of chemicals which are no longer used within the industry. A burning shed which has been treated with an organochlorine pre-1990 could still give off vapours which are dangerous to health.

Asbestos is also prevalent in many rural buildings, none of the masks issued to rural fire fighters offers protection against asbestos.

When attacking a structure fire, in particular shed fires, water is sprayed to extinguish the or to protect other buildings. These buildings may contain many of the chemicals identified above. It is unknown if the water running out of the sheds or buildings contain toxins. Furthermore, due to poor visibility at night it may not be possible to determine if and where the water is running out. Our boots come home from the fire soaking wet, our socks may be wet and we are exposed to the risk when removing out clothing.

The Glen RFB covers part of the National Highway network and has attended four vehicle fires in the past six years, two of which were trucks. At times there was no way possible to avoid the smoke. To leave the immediate vicinity would have meant a bushfire could have started in inaccessible terrain.

A high percentage of bushfires in our brigade's area, start on or burn within the highway's road reserve. This area is generally full of rubbish, car body trimming and tyres. These items all produce carcinogens when they are burning. When a fire is trying to jump the highway the volunteer firefighters do their best to stop it. They have to stand in the smoke to do this. They cannot see behind 3-4m high flames what types of rubbish is been burnt.

When Fighting bushfires on private property volunteer fire fighters may have to fight fires in areas where old sheep and cattle dips used to exist, or have been left derelict. Rails and fences may have been knocked down and left in the long grass and these areas are now among the most dangerous areas for now-banned residual chemicals and there is no way of knowing where these old structures exist on many properties.

If this Bill was to pass into legislation in its current format then the following scenario could occur. John Brown, Permanent Firefighter, just graduated from 12 weeks intensive training, is sent with his crew to a Remote shed fire at 8pm. When John arrives his Crew Leader advises him to wear his breathing apparatus and to attack the fire with a hose. John moves to his appointed position and finds Bill Smith who is a volunteer fire fighter with the local Rural Fire Brigade. They get talking on the job and Bill declares this his first fire as well, he completed his one day's training about 4 months ago and has not been to any training since due to work commitments. Bill is only wearing his



standard PPE and a paper dust mask. The fire melts chemical drums and the chemicals run out of the shed with the water been used to extinguish the fire both John and Bill's boots are wet through.

10 years later Bill and John meet at hospital, they have both been diagnosed with cancer which can be traced back to their 1<sup>st</sup> fire. John and his family are compensated, Bill was able to get to about 10 fires a year, and he is not compensated as he has not met the prerequisite.

How can the above scenario be fair? This Bill in its current format will create the scenario above.

#### Obtaining the required 150 incidents to eligible for compensation

The Glen RFB attends an average of around 20 fires a year. We also average between 10 to 15 other activities. That equates to about 3 activities a month. No one individual from the brigade attends every fire. The brigade is one of the busiest in Southern Downs Region. Under this proposed Bill it is highly unlikely that any of the approximate 300 volunteers in Southern Downs Region would ever qualify to be eligible for the compensation if they needed it.

The nature of volunteer organisations means record keeping is generally not very good. Many brigades would have poor records and it would be difficult for anyone to actually provide evidence they have attended 150 fires. This is probably exacerbated in busier brigades where it may be hard to keep up with record keeping due the busy nature of the brigade; it may become an afterthought given the fact no one is paid to do it.

Recommendation 72 of the Malone Review (2013) states that the Rural Fire Service Queensland develop a simple data collection system to record the activities of brigades.

All recommendations stemming from the Malone Review were adopted by the Government. In practice this recommendation lead to a directive to all Rural Fire Brigades that they no longer had to submit RF14A, RF14B and RF14C to their Area officers to have brigade activities recorded. Instead brigade activities would be taken directly from the word back provided to Firecom when the brigades were responded. Word back only records the Officer in charge of the appliance and does not include other brigade members attending. The defunct RF14 reports contained a section to list all attending volunteers from the brigade. From memory the directive to change procedures was introduced in early 2014. This means that for many Brigades there are no records of members attending fires or incidents for the past 18 months.

Most volunteers have paid employment, for many they lose income when attending fires, or may not be able to attend fires during work hours due to their employment commitments. Given that most fires occur mid to early afternoon, many volunteer Fire fighters are unable to attend fires five days out of seven or may be only able to attend a few fires a year during work hours. This again makes it impossible to meet the eligibility requirements of the Bill.

#### Other high risk exposure activities undertaken by Fire Fighters

Over the past decade Fire Fighters (Permanent, Auxiliary and Volunteers) across the state have been at the forefront of responding to Natural Disasters (predominately Floods and Cyclones), this often roles over into the recovery phase. During these events fire fighters are asked to assist communities by undertaking rescues, rapid damage assessments and cleaning up. In the course of one major event a fire fighter can on many occasions enter flood waters or buildings destroyed by wind or water to look for victims or just to help clean up and provide residents. When entering flood waters

or washing out a home or assessing a damaged home, fire fighters can be exposed to chemicals through absorption or from breathing, they can be exposed to asbestos when entering a damaged home. After a flood event Public Health messages are issued advising people not to enter flood waters due to the potential health risks associated with it. However fire fighters are conducting rescues and washing out these very same waters and must enter the water to do it. The Bill needs to include other high risk activities for consideration against the schedule.

We hope that our Brigades concerns listed above are considered on merit and are not disregarded for the sake of politics.



10/8/15

Regards  
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RFSQ  
QFES