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 To: [Finance and Administration Committee](#)  
 Cc: [Bundaberg Electorate Office](#)  
 Subject: Submission on Workers' Compensation and Rehabilitation and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2015  
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**To the Finance and Administration Committee - re. proposed differentiation in treatment between volunteer rural fire fighters on the one hand, and full time and auxiliary firefighters.**

As a volunteer firefighter for more than 12 years, I ask the Committee to question to review and question **why** this differentiation (which many consider unfair discrimination) is introduced in this Bill, whereas the earlier Bill presented by the Member for Kawana does not? Is this differentiation fair, reasonable and based on sound and equitable logic or evidence? I haven't had time or opportunity to access and examine the sources leading to this. We do have a letter of 4 August from Leanne Donaldson MP which relies primarily on the following, quoted from her letter:

*"When developing a policy basis for the new deemed disease provisions, discussions with Queensland Fire and Emergency Services highlighted that the roles, responsibilities and expectations of volunteer firefighters are distinct from auxiliary and full-time firefighters because they don't engage in active sustained firefighting work as regularly as auxiliary and permanent firefighters.*

*This was supported by the findings of Monash University's recent Australian Firefighter Health Study, a national retrospective study of mortality and cancer incidence among a cohort of 232,871 current and former Australian firefighters.*

*The data analysed by the Monash Study indicates that many volunteer firefighters have significantly fewer recorded attendances than full-time and part-time firefighters.*

*The study found that overall, full-time and part-time paid male firefighters have a significantly increased cancer incidence when compared to the Australian population, whereas Australian volunteer firefighters do not."*

To consider that further:

- If we accept for the moment that volunteer firefighters don't have a significantly increased cancer incidence, then what's the problem? Why differentiate/discriminate if the incidence of developing one of the forms of cancer listed as a result of firefighting is very small? That would be extraordinarily unfair to the potentially unfortunate few who do or may develop such attributable disease.
- If the volunteers do demonstrate a lower incidence, is this because
  - they attend fewer fires?
  - the fires they attend have less toxic smoke?
  - they have less exposure to smoke?
  - they are better protected on the fireground against smoke?
  - there is some demographic factor of volunteer firefighters relative to urban and auxiliaries?

To look at these further.

• **Fewer fires?**

The above quote includes statements that volunteers "*don't engage in active sustained firefighting work as regularly*" and "*have significantly fewer recorded attendances*".

I don't have data on this but can observe like anyone else, and as a result question these conclusions as generalities.

While I have enormous respect for the work that those in the red trucks do in structural firefighting, road accident rescues, swift water rescues, do they actually attend more fires involving sustained exposure to smoke?

Putting aside attendance at faulty fire alarms, kitchen toasters that set off alarms and other callouts attended to without significant and sustained smoke exposures, how many major conflagrations does an individual paid firefighter attend in the course of a year?

I suggest very few.

Further, in the case of auxiliaries, usually in small towns (in my area such as Childers, Gin Gin, Bargara) there are very few such fires. They are called out to bushfires, where their role is to locate themselves at rural houses or property in the event that the wildfire threatens such

property, while the volunteers are in there, in the smoke and heat fighting the fire.

Even in the cities, urbans respond to to grassfires and similarly, and we are called in also. The urbans usually leave quickly, which is quite right, while we stay on for hours more, in the smoke mopping up.

And when there are structural fires outside of the areas with reticulated water we are called in also (usually in the middle the night) to provide water.

To reiterate, there are not that many major structural fires, whereas volunteer Brigades attend dozens of fires each year, including many controlled burns - our Brigade usually attends between 40 and 60 fires each year. And when we do, we are generally in attendance for many hours.

A further complicating factor is that overall, records of attendances by volunteers are very poor. Our Brigade does submit incident reports on every fire we attend, but I am told by our Area office that most Brigades do not - I was told that only about one third of incident reports are submitted.

Hence volunteers overall would find it VERY difficult;t to substantiate attendance at 150 fires.

- **Less toxic smoke?**

Probably, however note that we do support at structural fires, that we do burn along roadsides full of discarded plastics etc., and that we have very poor protection from smoke, unlike the paid firefighters.

- **Less exposure to smoke?**

Absolutely not. We spend much longer at fires, and by the very nature of our tasks, we are very often or usually in the heaviest smoke for many hours, because that is where we need to be, on the leeward side conducting back burning against the wind (both wildfires and controlled burns), and mopping up for hours, again with very poor smoke protection.

- **Better protected?**

Clearly not. We only have disposable paper or similar masks, or other devices of our own choosing, such as a bandana. Paid firefighters, quite rightly, have proper Breathing Apparatus.

- **Demographic factors?**

There may well be.

As the Committee can readily access data on, volunteer firefighters are of a much older age distribution, averaging in the order of 55 years. Further, it is formally reported that the age demographic of volunteer firefighters is increasing while overall membership drops. One consequence of that is that it puts greater pressure on older members, who in general are more readily available for callouts during the working week. On attendance at any wildfire it is obvious that in the various Brigades present there are many in their 60s even 70s. (Fire Wardens are probably older still.)

I haven't seen the Monash University study referred to, but I very much doubt that it takes into account that the "typical" long term volunteer firefighter doesn't retire from active firefighting until in his or her late 60s or into the 70s, much older than when the "typical" paid firefighter ends his or her role in active firefighting.

As I understand many if not most cancers attributable to exposure to factors such as smoke or asbestos take many years to develop and manifest.

Hence, noting an average life span of around 80 years, at least for males, there is less time for the retired volunteer firefighter to develop such cancers in their remaining life span, i.e. they will probably die of other factors first.

That is not a bad thing of course, but I suggest is real and probably accounts for or contributes to the apparent Monash conclusion regarding cancer incidence in volunteer versus paid firefighters. Even that quote says that "many" volunteers have fewer recorded attendances - recording is very poor, and what about those that do have high attendances and are unfortunate to develop atributable disease?

I submit that the intention to differentiate in the proposed legislation between volunteer and paid firefighters is unfair, discriminatory, unworkable (overall very poor records of attendance), probably based on unsound or questionable logic, and is unnecessary.

Bill Fisher