

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

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Attachments:

Submitter Comments:

Background. I am a retired Australian Regular Army Lieutenant Colonel and Director at Queensland Health. I am currently an active volunteer with both SES and RFS and have deployed on multiple deployments in the last twelve months and turned out too many local areas 000 calls. Terms of Reference points addressed: 2, 3, 7, and 9. Point 2. One substantial barrier to volunteering is obviously the financial reward aspect. Needless to say, we are volunteers but thought should once again be directed at scoping tax incentives for volunteers. An example of a deployment earlier this year saw me deployed up in the Cooktown area to provide cyclone damage relief in remote indigenous communities. I deployed as a volunteer RFS firefighter alongside paid auxiliary firefighting crews and SES teams. My crew was doing exactly the same role as the paid firefighters, who were paid in salary and allowances an alleged \$4500 for the five-day deployment. My crew and SES vols were only able to claim back four nights of incidentals at \$23 per night. Some form of tax offset would provide an incentive to volunteers for giving up their time and in some instances being financially penalized for volunteering. I have completed ten or so statewide deployments in the last twelve months and I see the same volunteer faces on each deployment... and none of us are getting any younger. Providing some form of tax incentive for deployment and turnouts would go a long way to increase our volunteer base and additionally free up volunteers for deployments, which at present cost them due to a loss of earnings/wages. Point 3. I am second officer of a rural fire brigade, and I am proud to say that the corps of our volunteers while small is strong, they are motivated and when available for turnout and deployment they rise to meet the challenges that these present. One of the many challenges that rural firefighters come across is the standard and range of firefighting vehicles and the command and control of our crews on a large and dispersed fire ground. These challenges can adversely affect the willingness of volunteers to deploy or be called out and can gravely compromise volunteer safety. RURAL FIRE APPLIANCES: RFBs operate an eclectic series of medium fire attack appliances, Iveco, Mitsubishi, Isuzu etc all with different characteristics and pump operating systems - none are universal, and all require some form of hands-on training to operate. Out light attack appliances are the same most based on Ford, Nissan, Toyota and Mercedes platforms, again the operating systems for the vehicles differ, including some having low pressure hoses and pumps, some using diesel and some using petrol engines and pumps. Some of the more modern appliances have been fitted with a roof mounted deluge system, which could spray the truck if fire effected, but the majority of medium appliances and all light attacks are not. All of the medium attack fleet is equipped with standard road tires, which makes little sense as we operate 90% of the time off road. Even Ergon who operate the largest Iveco fleet in QLD has converted the standard road tires on their vehicles to wider, chunkier offroad tires. The whole fleet needs modernization and standardization and needs to be fit for task. COMMAND AND CONTROL: All rural appliances have VHF and UHF radio systems. VHF can talk with regional Fire Communications staff and UHF is used on the fireground to talk to incident control and neighboring appliances. However, this communication is reliant on terrain and rebroadcasting services and the majority of the time our appliances are unable to speak with each other or even the local incident commander. This is a paramount safety concern for all crews on a wide fire front. Likewise, the incident controller, who may have twenty or so appliances on his active fireground has little or no situational awareness of where his crews actually are, as our vehicles are not fitted with GPS or enabled for digital communications. The crews are tracked by pieces of card with the appliance and crew details placed in a folder at the command post and sectors allocated for command and control. The use of these T Cards shows where the vehicles should be only, not where they actually are or if

they are static or moving, or indeed if a fire is racing towards them. In the military and within Queensland Health the majority of our vehicles are GPS tracked, ensuring accurate and up to date situational awareness when required... but not our rural firefighting appliances? Surely this is a disaster waiting to happen and should be addressed urgently. Point 7: Addressing the issues that I have raised in Points 2 and 3 would go a long way in ensuring that our volunteers feel valued and are provided the necessary equipment to conduct their multitude of tasks effectively and safely. This would go a long way to increase emergency response volunteering especially in younger age groups, who witness RFS units deploying in aging and not fit for task vehicles and with aging crews. Point 9: While opportunities to "professionalize" RFB members have been enacted, such as giving nationally accredited certificate qualifications alongside firefighting courses completed is a novel, it is not necessarily the right step, as one size does not fit all our members. For example, the Basic Fire Fighting course could be conducted over one intense practical weekend, now it takes up to twelve months to complete. Advanced firefighter, crew leader etc. are the same. This is ridiculous and is a major taking point with applicants who want to get out on the ground and simply fight fires and deploy interstate quickly. The old school courses need to be reinstated, as well as retaining the accredited courses which members if they choose to do so can follow and complete in slower time. This is a major detriment to recruiting and firefighter advancement and therefore retention.