

## **Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland**

<b>Submission No:</b>	67
<b>Submitted by:</b>	Chris Drake
<b>Publication:</b>	Making the submission and your name public
<b>Attachments:</b>	See attachment
<b>Submitter Comments:</b>	

Chris Drake,  
Former 2<sup>nd</sup> Officer,  
Verrierdale Rural Fire Brigade.  
6<sup>th</sup> Feb 2025

### Submission to: Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

I'm addressing these terms of this inquiry: #2 (views & risks to volunteers), #3 (experiences, challenges, and recommendations), #5 (support deficiencies), #7 (emergency volunteering increase options), and #9 (relevant reports).

I resigned as a volunteer firefighter on 31<sup>st</sup> December 2024.

In years past, our stations' first officer also resigned, for the same reason I just did.

From direct personal experience and brigade observations, the resignation reasons I'm about to explain are common for volunteer firefighters.

At the time I resigned, I was the longest-service active volunteer in our brigade, being in my 16th year. I rose to the rank of second officer (I declined all further promotion attempts) and was an officer for most of my service. I've personally recruited many new volunteers, trained nearly 100 in my time, and attended hundreds of fires, floods and storm incidents across the state. In our brigade, I was the most perpetually-available volunteer for callouts (my self-employment is 100% flexible) so I subsequently hold our station record for the most frequent responder to callouts and the year-on-year recordholder for the highest incident attendance each year. I also was deeply engaged, over decades, in attempts to improve QFES safety, by providing feedback and offers to help, participating in debriefing sessions and meetings, and lodging complaints.

In this submission, where I use RFSQ (Rural Fire Service Queensland), I equally mean QFES (the former name for the same department and people).

The core reason for our resignation is repeatedly spelled out in the recent KPMG report:

<https://www.fire.qld.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-10/Independent-Review-of-QFES.pdf>, the same one which led the QFES being dissolved entirely: **Toxic Culture**. Of the 602 sentences in that report discussing QFES issues, a whopping 343 of those are dedicated to toxic culture issues. There are 2 reasons why it is impossible to adequately explain what this means from the perspective of a firefighter: #1 is that all submissions to this review are censored – see [https://documents.parliament.qld.gov.au/committees/guidelines/Guide\\_MakingASubmission\\_WebVersion.pdf](https://documents.parliament.qld.gov.au/committees/guidelines/Guide_MakingASubmission_WebVersion.pdf) for details. If I put anything in here which “might be offensive”, my submission will not be published. #2 is that it's impossible to convey how deeply this toxicity affects every level of RFSQ operations without personally experiencing it. I can't tell you here, and even if I could, words would not be able to do the problem justice.

Here is an extract from my resignation letter dated December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2024:

“The actions of RFSQ since my responses to the commissioners' sham "Call to Action" video, along with actions (or lack thereof) from my last decade of safety-related feedback and enquiries, have made it abundantly clear to me that remaining under RFSQ poses too great a risk to the safety, financial and legal well-being of all volunteers.” (FYI <https://qfes.wistia.com/medias/jh99zmgxji> is the “Call to Action” video)

I encourage the committee to reach out to me for details of the above – I'm happy to privately supply the hundreds of items of material I've submitted and collected over the years to help explain why it is not safe to be a Volunteer in Queensland. I urge the committee to peruse the following – the 4<sup>th</sup> in a series of independent reports over 10 years: <https://www.fire.qld.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-09/Complaints-Management-System-Review-Final-Report.pdf> all of which persistently re-identify systemic misconduct. Here's a direct quote from it (my highlights):

“the review found there were still examples of a **pervasive** lack of trust throughout the QFD, particularly between management and employees with respect to the CMS. The issue of trust was **raised repeatedly** in focus groups.”

That’s the politest possible way to put the problem in writing! In plain English, what they’re saying is that the words that QFES management and their PR machine put out are not true. What they **say** about safety and related matters, is not reflected in what they **do** when those are brought to their attention.

In addition – many other points are worth noting:

- Nobody has ever asked me, or anyone else I’m aware of, why we volunteered in the first place. If you see anything purporting to show why people volunteered – it’s probably “not to be trusted” – they aren’t asking, so they don’t know.
- Neither me now, not anyone else I know in the past, has ever been asked why they left. Again – they aren’t asking.
- I am not aware of any new recruit who has ever come to our brigade by the efforts of anyone other than our brigade directly (our advertising, our radio and other promotional work, our attendance at markets etc). QFES/RFSQ have over a \$ billion dollars to spend, but nothing more than pamphlets has been provided to us for recruitment in my time.
- A very large number of “volunteers” on our books are not real – they attended a few training sessions, then never showed up again. Many more are very old, or simply stopped turning up. The actual true number of available Volunteer firefighters in Queensland is more likely to be half of the actual number that’s quoted (so, that’s half of 27,000 today – down from 44,614 in 1997). Again – I’m not aware of our brigade ever having been officially ask how many available volunteers we actually have: if you read anything purporting to show numbers, – it’s probably “not to be trusted” – they aren’t asking, so they don’t know.

## Recommendations

Having, as I do, well over a decade of personal experience in volunteer recruitment, training, and observations of attrition and RFSQ processes and behaviour, I am confident that I can make the following recommendation for how to solve the dwindling numbers of firefighter volunteers in Queensland:

### 1. Privatisise the RFSQ.

There have been 19+ royal commissions, 56 inquiries, 315 official reviews, and countless thousands of national reports into bushfire disasters and service management in recent history, and the only consistent outcome is that nobody listens to feedback, few or no recommendations get implemented, and nothing changes. The repeatedly proven fact that public service accountability and compliance is non-existent within our emergency services is so thoroughly and well established beyond all doubt in that enormous body of work, that I believe the only way to fix things is to move the entire service OUT of government hands, and into the hands of a body which is subject to genuine oversight and rules compliance (e.g. a Not-for-Profit like a Co-op, Public Benevolent Institution, or Trust), where actual penalties exist for mismanagement and misconduct and have genuine likelihood of being imposed. So many other benefits would result as well; e.g. RFSQ is a \$billion dollar QLD government expense, the vast majority of which is wasted money because nobody cares (so I know many crazy examples!!).

You can’t get rid of “Toxic Culture” without changing the culture, and that’s the real root cause of the volunteering crisis in QLD.

19+ royal commissions:

[https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/Senate/Former\\_Committees/agric/completed\\_inquiries/2008-10/bushfires/report/c02](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Former_Committees/agric/completed_inquiries/2008-10/bushfires/report/c02)

56 inquiries <https://theconversation.com/we-have-already-had-countless-bushfire-inquiries-what-good-will-it-do-to-have-another-129896>

324 official reviews: <https://tools.bnhcrc.com.au/ddr/home> (with 7350 recommendations!),

Thousands of reports <https://www.qfes.qld.gov.au/links/Pages/Operation-Synergy-Review-Report.aspx>

2. Prioritise volunteer recruitment as a key performance indicator of the new body (it must be a new body, everything that's been tried before has not worked - see above)

3. Allow the newly privatised body to offer incentives and compensation to volunteers. For example, an "All Parks Free Pass" which allows us to enjoy our bush at no charge. Since we frequently get called out to extinguish this when on fire, encouraging us to enjoy it before it burns also improves our valuable local knowledge for when we're there in emergencies. I did attempt to put this in place - QPWS rudely refused all our efforts.

4. Reimburse volunteers for expenses - personal clothing and PPE washing and maintenance, fuel and vehicle expenses to attend frequent training and callouts, food and drink and sundries all add up to a significant cost, but current brigade rules totally ban all volunteer expenses from being covered.

At the very least, Volunteers need to be classed properly as "Employees" under Queensland law, which sections 465 [especially (3)(a) and (c)] and section 8 of the act permits:

See: <https://www.legislation.qld.gov.au/view/html/inforce/current/act-2016-063#sec.465>

The RFSQ rules were amended on 1<sup>st</sup> Jan 2025 imposing all the obligations of an "Employee" on all Volunteers, but without conferring any of the benefits – such as joining a union, which is currently banned for Volunteers in Queensland. We are legally prevented from organising to voice in favour of our rights and safety right now: that needs to change.

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Chris Drake,  
Former 2<sup>nd</sup> Officer,  
Verrierdale Rural Fire Brigade.  
28<sup>th</sup> Feb 2025

## **Submission to: Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland**

### **IMPORTANT NOTE TO THE COMMITTEE**

I'm addressing term #9 – relevant matters

### **Inappropriate committee member: Ann Leahy**

Minister Leahy took office during a tumultuous RFSQ reorganisation, immediately prior to their imposition of entirely inappropriate rules which directly contradict the signed in-force charter and conduct requirements of both her ministry and the fire department.

Leading up to the 1<sup>st</sup> Jan, the date upon which these rules were imposed, I contacted her office more than 5 times, each being more urgent than the last, on account of getting no response, in an attempt to solicit compliance with her obligations, and address the deficiencies in those new rules (see my submission dated 27<sup>th</sup> Feb 2025, if it has not been censored). In addition, I drew to her direct attention some of the most disgusting possible behaviour of over 30 different RFSQ staff and their direct involvement in the deaths of multiple volunteers and firefighters, along with the ongoing systemic misconduct through the CMS (Complaints) team. Between her appointment and now, I've sent well over a dozen messages, but I have been utterly ignored, except for one time: I asked our local MP to ask, on my behalf, what is going on, and that provoked her only reply. As a result, we know for certain that she is fully aware of the illegal conduct taking place within RFSQ senior management, and she herself is a participant in this behaviour: deliberately ignoring legitimate life-threatening safety complaints and refusing to even talk to me to find out "my side of the story" as to what is going on is a violation of multiple Queensland laws, not least including health-and-safety.

As a result of my attempts to engage with the Minister regarding the shocking misconduct throughout the RFSQ, her senior staffer [REDACTED] made telephone contact (always telephone – because written records would be a problem!) with my immediate superior (or station 1<sup>st</sup> officer, [REDACTED]). [REDACTED] clearly and unambiguously threatened [REDACTED] that under no circumstances should he support my efforts (I have 14 outstanding officially-filed safety-related complaints in their system, and 5 review requests – every single one of which has not even been acknowledged), and if [REDACTED] did so, it would result in him facing the same orchestrated ostracism that has been waged against myself. [REDACTED] shared additional disgusting and untrue accusations and comments that [REDACTED] made about me as well (always by phone, because, evidence), so it is clear that their attacks against me are deliberately personal in nature.

Subsequently, another staffer, [REDACTED], from her office, began phoning me in an attempt to "disengage", offering all kinds of absurd reasons about why the Minister cannot be involved, like classing these issues as "day to day matters", raising claims about not wanting to interfere with their independence, and even saying she was too busy because of a crocodile situation in her portfolio. These are always phone calls, because the things that are said are the kinds of thing nobody wants written records of!

[REDACTED] made multiple promises to me, including that he would get the RFSQ to acknowledge my complaints (they never did) or that he would provide me with the contact details of the independent contractor, Kirsten Hilton, paid to ensure the CMS-teams compliance with the recommendations of their last scathing review. [REDACTED], the Minister, and RFSQ alike are all doing everything possible to prevent the illegal actions of their complaints team from seeing the light of day. Despite the fact that Ms. Hilton was billed in the media as having the role of dealing with all issues that arise within this team, the RFSQ are blocking her from access to finding out what is really going on. See next:



File No: QFS/59665  
MECS No: 00326-2025



Office of the  
**Chief Human Resource Officer**  
**People and Culture Directorate**

**Queensland Fire Department**

Mr Christopher Drake  
[Redacted]

Dear Mr Drake

I have been advised by the Minister's Office that you have requested the contact details for Ms Kristen Hilton.

I can advise Ms Hilton has been engaged to oversee the progress of the implementation of the Queensland Fire Department Complaints Management Review recommendations.

Ms Hilton's engagement does not extend to consulting with members of the public and for this reason contact details for Ms Hilton will not be provided.

Yours sincerely  
[Redacted]

Katrina McGill  
**Chief Human Resource Officer**

It is also abundantly clear that they “got away with this” in their last review as well – time and again you can read the reviewers frustration at them not giving access to records: <https://www.fire.qld.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-09/Complaints-Management-System-Review-Final-Report.pdf> - in every one of the 4 reviews into the RFSQ Complaints team, over a span of 10 years, “systemic misconduct” has been continually identified!

Ann Leahy has repeatedly proven herself unfit for any role on a committee through her repeated and steadfast refusal to listen to or face the facts of the extreme dysfunction taking place in her department, directly affecting volunteer safety.

I have had the displeasure of reading some of the other 100 or so submissions so-far published before mine. It is beyond staggering just how many of them are all saying the same thing. The RFSQ is rotten to the core, and I welcome any chance to supply the volumes of evidence I have proving that Ms Leahy is the same as the rest of them.

A minister who persistently and actively engages in illegal orchestrated indifference against myself (and likely many other) volunteers, and whose team use disgusting threats and evidence-preventing tactics to try and cover up their actions, is not fit for any role on a committee into volunteering.



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Chris Drake,  
Former 2 nd Officer,  
Verrierdale Rural Fire Brigade.  
27 th Feb 2025

## **Submission to: Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland**

**Overview of 16.5 Years of Service in RFSQ→QFES→RFSQ**

I'm addressing these terms of this inquiry: #2 (views & risks to volunteers), #3 (experiences, challenges, and recommendations), #5 (support deficiencies)

### **Training and Recruitment Issues**

When I started as a volunteer firefighter, training was straightforward and effective: I was "taken under the wing" of the first officer, quickly trained "in house" through practical situations, introduced to managed controlled burns, and then began tackling wildfires.

Today's process is catastrophically inefficient:

- New recruits are immediately treated like criminals, forced to undergo police checks and obtain blue-cards, processes that can take months
- They're forbidden from touching equipment until completing absurd classroom training requiring multiple sacrificed weekends
- Training features disinterested, unprofessional lecturers conducting sham exams where everyone is told exactly what to write to pass
- After 6-12 months (during which most quit), when volunteers finally return to their local station, we must teach them basics like "how to make the water come out"

### **Systemic Toxicity Between Departments**

The toxicity between professional and volunteer firefighters is endemic. The "red trucks" (paid urban firefighters) openly demonstrate contempt for the "yellow trucks" (volunteers), with blatant disrespect on firegrounds.

#### **Peregian Beach House Fire Example:**

The house that burned down during the Peregian Beach fire did so precisely because urban firefighters were actively obstructing volunteer operations. Urban firefighters physically blocked me from driving along a fire trail to assess emergency exit options—I had to exit my vehicle and confront the individual deliberately blocking my path. Approximately 30 minutes later, when the house fire was reported, these urban crews abruptly abandoned the bush (our responsibility) to rush to the house (their responsibility), which ultimately burned down. Only then was I permitted to use a hose and perform my actual duties.

This toxicity permeates all firefighting operations:

- During debriefs, anyone brave enough to suggest improvements is publicly berated
- There is no functional "lessons management" or complaints system
- Escalating issues to authorities (Minister/CCC/Ombudsman/AG/Premier) produces zero results
- All critical feedback in online discussions is censored

## Fireground Management Failures

Small incidents generally run smoothly because they're handled entirely by volunteers who know what they're doing. Large-scale incidents become chaotic disasters when PAID RFSQ teams arrive to "take control" despite having less practical experience than the volunteers they're managing.

Decision paralysis is rampant:

- Skilled crews are blocked from executing necessary actions
- We can't use chainsaws (deemed "too dangerous")
- We're rarely permitted to conduct backburning operations (which prevent 90% of larger disasters)
- Communication systems fail regularly
- We're denied access to incident management tools

### Fraser Island Example:

It took management FIVE DAYS to decide how to respond to the Fraser Island fires. Our crew arrived on days 4-6 of the response and spent two days idle—eating ice cream and swimming—while RFSQ, QPWS, local rangers, and QFD argued about who was in charge. When finally authorized to act, we saved Lake McKenzie using backburning, but under absurd operational constraints.

### Volunteer Treatment and Support

Volunteering is financially and time-consuming. Different volunteers have different motivations—social connection, civic duty, career aspirations—yet management treats everyone as "soulless free robots the government can order around to save themselves \$3 billion in annual remuneration costs."

The fundamental disrespect is jarring: when major incidents occur (usually because RFSQ bungled the initial response), volunteers work tirelessly to "save the day" and receive public accolades, but internally are treated with utter contempt:

- Simple requests are ignored (fixing broken website links, distributing awarded medals)
- Offers to help are rejected
- Volunteer-led initiatives are denied

### New Station Example:

I personally spent months preparing paperwork for a new station to house our larger fire engine, only to be denied permission to file it because "all grant applications must go through head office." After submitting the ready-to-file paperwork through official channels FIVE YEARS AGO, nothing has happened. I sent FIFTY follow-up emails between February 2020 and October 2022 before giving up. Meanwhile, construction costs have tripled, making the project 300% more expensive than our original proposal.

### Administrative Burdens and Double Standards

The bureaucratic burden on volunteers is overwhelming:

- Constant new rules and requirements
- RFSQ sends paid managers to audit our meetings and minutes
- Triplicate paper forms that frequently get "misplaced"
- Common-sense practices now outlawed
- Basic uniform ordering now requires hours navigating online catalogues followed by months-long wait times

Meanwhile, RFSQ routinely ignores its own requirements, doesn't publish (or even take) minutes of important meetings, and operates without any functioning complaints system.

## Constant decision paralysis.

### Cooribah Lost-House Example:

I self-responded with one crew to this event, when a friend living there called in distress. Firecom asked me **not** to attend (apparently unaware of the unfolding disaster), but I talked them into allowing me anyhow. This intense multi-day 24/7 response succeeded in saving all but one house, and we spent a lot of time driving around blindly looking for "things on fire" (people's front yards and gardens, peoples back yard sheds, loads of bush in and around, etc). No crews had any idea where other crews were, or had been, so inevitably, there were duplicitous checks of already-checked houses, while others were not checked at all. That's how the house that was lost burned down: the crew that extinguished the surrounding blaze had no way to tell anyone that a return-to-check was needed, or when.

We were forbidden from using "backburning" – our most effective technique for addressing these kinds of large-scale situations. The even was eventually ended, when a senior volunteer got us all to switch to an unmonitored radio channel, we did the backburn anyway, and the event was soon over and we at last got to go home!

### Verrierdale Brigade Example:

Half of the Verrierdale brigade was assigned to CAR PARKING MANAGEMENT in a Coles parking lot during the most critical moments of the major Peregrine beach fires. Despite repeatedly requesting reassignment to actual firefighting duties, they were denied.

During that same event, there was basically no functioning communications: every channel was so busy, nobody could talk effectively (or at all) to anyone! As a result of this, as my crew and I responded, we were unable to find out where the staging area was, so instead we "drove to the smoke". Upon arrival, we found our tiny 2-man light appliance was the only fire truck anywhere in the area we reached, with a wall of fire bearing down on many dozens of unprotected houses directly facing the bush. When we did eventually manage to get a message through, the crews that turned up refused to act, incorrectly believing there was no real threat, and (despite me being senior, and fireground convention being first-to-arrive-is-in-charge, they would not do as they were told). My crew and I frantically housed down the yards and roofs of the line of houses, and in just a half hour later, the entire area went pitch black as a rain of fire fell down on everything. The video I have of this is incredible! The only reason no houses burned down, was because me and my 1 crew member slugged it out (while everyone else sat around watching us) to prepare for what we knew was coming.

## Institutionalized Dishonesty

KPMG described this as a "**pervasive** lack of trust throughout the QFD." RFSQ, in conjunction with their PR team, regularly manufactures fictional versions of reality and publishes these aspirational goals as if they're facts. They censor ALL criticism while claiming to "publish all questions" and "answer all feedback."

The "Open Line" magazine was entirely shut down after I questioned their censorship policies.

Practically every statement that RFSQ and now QFES make about themselves, is nothing more than a public-relations doctored version of what they think everyone else wants to hear. There is almost nothing, whatsoever, in common between what they **say** they do, and the reality of what they **actually** do (which, in most cases, is usually nothing)

## PR Instead of Safety

### Merryl Dray Case:

After the 2022 death of SES volunteer Merryl Dray (which resulted in charges against QFES), their response was deplorable. They paid Sarah Ebsworth from their PR team to go to Ms. Dray's funeral to stage photos for press releases, rather than addressing the safety failures (or admitting their feedback dysfunction) that caused her death.



[Queensland Fire and Emergency Services charged over the 2022 death of Lowood SES volunteer Merryl Dray](#)<sup>1</sup>

The same problems recur endlessly, and anyone who attempts to address them faces vicious ostracism.

Two years prior to her death, I warned the QFES that their dysfunctional situational awareness issues were going to result in tragedy, and I offered to fix those for free (I'm a software engineer), and many times over the months and years after that, I followed up to try and get action. I was rudely blocked and ignored every time. Merryl's death was totally avoidable – had QFES not been so steadfast in their refusal to let any volunteer ever help them, they would have had a system that told them there was no need to send Merryl to her death, because the house she was attending had already been attended by a different crew!

### New Rules for Silencing Dissent

Effective January 1st, [new rules](#)<sup>2</sup> were implemented granting RFSQ unilateral power to dismiss volunteers—a power previously held by brigades themselves. This directly contradicts the signed [charter](#)<sup>3</sup> with volunteers and adds new dismissal justifications including "conducts themselves in a manner considered to be injurious or prejudicial to the character or interests of the Brigade"—essentially criminalizing all dissent and criticism.

This change also means volunteer legal protections during, or resulting from, fireground operations are now entirely at RFSQ's discretion. Volunteers simply do not have the protection that the RFSQ "**pervasive** lack of trust throughout the QFD" public relations teams make them think they do.

This is why I resigned on December 31st.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-03-01/qfes-charged-over-death-of-ses-volunteer-2022-floods-merryl-dray/103534506>

<sup>2</sup> <https://cdn-au.mailsnd.com/73438/Pl6DqNYkXiogSfjUzpoEUvvxXUrTz6FluNXO4nAo6mM/1734393178/3948672.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.fire.qld.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-08/2021-RFS-Volunteer-Brigades--Charter---Signed.pdf>