


## **Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland**

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## VOLUNTEER SUBMISSION.

Over the last twenty years the number of volunteers in the Queensland Rural Fire Service has dropped from 44,000 to 27,000. To make these figures even worse, a large proportion of the volunteers lost include the “thirty-year men”, the bushfire-experienced long-term members who are essential to safe operation on the fireground, and to give practical training to the inexperienced people who depend on them, as bushfire-fighting is mainly learnt from them – bushfires are very complex entities and book learning has only a limited use.

Volunteer numbers Australia-wide are falling, and have been the subject of many studies. The reasons – demographics, the financial cost of volunteering, increased difficulty getting time off work, time-poor workforce, lack of availability of replacement workers etc are well known.

There is a general principle relating to volunteers – **when they are supported, appreciated and respected they will remain and flourish!**

This fact is generally ignored by bureaucracies as they do not understand [or generally care] how to motivate volunteers. The historical example of this is the Australian Army in WW1 which was composed of volunteers. Initially this volunteer army was officered by ‘professional’ military types, usually from the UK, who had no experience of working with volunteers. Apart from a minority of officers who adapted to the volunteer mentality, the relationship was not as productive as it could have been. In the final years of WW1 the introduction of Australian senior officers from a volunteer background produced a substantial lift in troop effectiveness and morale plus a reduction in casualties.

However in Queensland we have have a historical distinct lack of volunteer support and appreciation from QFRS, QFRA, QFRS and QFD etc etc. Ever since the volunteer BushFire Brigades were transferred under Fire and Rescue

control about 1990 we have been subjected to cycles of “benign neglect” alternating with the mushroom approach of being ignored.

This process was briefly in abeyance when Ms Pam Millican was appointed Rural Fire Commissioner from about 2000 to 2003. During this brief period volunteers designed their own firetrucks, tested and selected firefighting equipment, and had substantial input into volunteer training materials. This resulted in a huge boost to volunteer morale, which upset QFRS bureaucrats so much that Ms Millican was terminated, and replaced with a more QFRS-compliant commissioner. Ever since then volunteers generally have been regarded as a resource to be used only when necessary, but ignored at other times.

Some fifteen years ago there was a change in the QFRS attitude to volunteers, along the lines of “get them under control!” Fire and Rescue crews visited local RFBs and some training was given. At the same time designated F&R officers were despatched to all bushfires to take command. As these officers usually had little or no bushfire experience, and a tenuous grip of the AIIMS-IMS principles of Incident Control, the results were mixed, but usually poor. Competent Rural volunteer officers with vital local knowledge were sidelined, and junior volunteers were not able to get competent operational mentoring, which is major part of RFB training. Senior volunteer officers who dared to offer advice were usually quickly put back in their box and then ignored.

Given the insult and abuse that volunteers have received from the paid fire service, it is a wonder that we have any left. I suspect that the fact that they are looking after their own community is the only factor that has most volunteers still in place.

### **THE SOLUTION.**

Given the disaster of the last thirty-five -plus years under Urban [Fire and Rescue Service] control, which has seen the loss of about forty percent of RFB volunteers, including much of the most experienced officer cohort, only immediate drastic action has a chance of keeping the Rural Fire Service in Queensland going as a long term viable entity. This includes:-

- Establishing the Queensland Rural Fire Service as a fully independent body [eg similar to Ergon], reporting directly to government. Financing via the Emergency Service Levy which is imposed as part of local government rate notices already exists. The current 'independent RFSQ', as part of Queensland Fire Department is a total farce, with the QFES's total control remaining, just under another name.
- The RFBAQ being named as the statewide representative of RFB volunteers, and advising the RFSQ on volunteer issues.
- Firetrucks to be majority designed by users, not bureaucrats or contractors. Ditto equipment.
- Volunteers to have substantial input into training materials and processes. Complete separation from RFD's RTO.
- Volunteer members to have equal standing to staff and using the same rank structure.
- All staff to come from a RFB or similar [LDMG, SES etc] background.
- Minimal bureaucracy with numbers pegged to volunteer numbers. Paid staff only used where a volunteer is not available.
- Volunteers to be fully compensated for travel and other expenses incurred with regard to training, meetings away from home base, public relations etc. No payment for work on fire operations as long as sustenance and support are provided.
- A substantial number of the current new position upload [?144 positions] to be directed to volunteer training and training support. QFES had the highest proportion of bureaucrats to frontline staff of any fire service in Australia, with initial figures from QFD appearing to be even worse. RFSQ must avoid this deadweight bureaucracy.

There are a myriad of issues which need addressing at present , but basically we have the bones of a volunteer rural fire service still in existence – just!

If we want a viable, healthy and stable group of volunteers supporting Queensland – remembering rural fire brigades also attend road accidents, flood events, cyclone and storm damage etc., then some urgent surgery is necessary.

I believe that full Independence of the Rural Fire Service from QFES / QFD / Fire and Rescue Service etc is the only thing that will work long term.