


## **Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland**

<b>Submission No:</b>	116
<b>Submitted by:</b>	
<b>Publication:</b>	Making the submission public but withholding your name
<b>Attachments:</b>	See attachment
<b>Submitter Comments:</b>	

## Submission to Committee:

I have served as a volunteer rural firefighter and officer bearer in my local brigade for ~25 years and donated thousands of hours to my local community. This has been a very positive experience, but over the last several years I have witnessed a severe decline in all of the brigades in my area. Overall, the numbers of members have declined, but more importantly the number of active firefighters has plummeted by ~80% and is now dangerously low. Community safety and crew safety are now severely compromised as brigades often struggle to raise even a small crew for an emergency. This decline has corresponded with a virtual takeover of the community-run brigades by a ballooning government bureaucracy that is largely based in the cities. The management have little idea how to treat volunteers and the realities of rural communities; we are now treated as paid public servants. For example, thousands of long-serving volunteers were lost or banned from firefighting over a paperwork issue that was handled in an overbearing and heavy-handed manner. In addition, our ability to recruit new firefighters has also been severely hampered by over-regulation. Many of the surviving members are disillusioned and sick of the over-regulation, believing the organisation is “bleeding out” under the heavy hand of the public service. Besides compromised safety, the decline has also damaged our communities: local brigades were one of the few places where people could get meet, interact and come together in times of happiness and hardship. Please find below a summary of my main points, along suggestions for resurrecting the volunteer rural firefighting system.

### Detail:

1. Numbers of active firefighters has declined severely, e.g. in my immediate area the number of active firefighters ~10 years ago (in brackets) compared to the present: Clevedon RFB (10) to 2, Nome RFB (13) to 4 and Cungulla RFB (10) to 2. Many of the current firefighters are over 65. At least 15 long-serving firefighters in the area were lost after the blue-card debacle (see below), either banned from firefighting by QRFS or quitting in disgust. Note that QRFS only reports numbers of members, which is misleading as the majority of members are now not allowed on the fire-ground due to excessive training or certification requirements (see below).
2. Many members are prevented from fighting due to excessive mandatory training (e.g. five days offsite minimum). In the past, most training was done onsite by brigade officers. Prior experience is not recognised, for example using a chainsaw (which is essential) requires two days training, despite the fact that many rural residents use chainsaws on a regular basis. Many more members are now banned from firefighting for not having child minding certificates (see below).
3. The fall in volunteer numbers is often blamed on “changing demographics and community values”, but we do not see this. We presently have more fit, able-bodied people in our community than in the past. Many show an interest, but are put off by the excessive paperwork and training demands. In the past, paperwork and training was mostly handled by the brigades and was relatively straightforward. This clearly suited rural people who are often busy and have a low tolerance of paperwork and impractical demands on their time. A simple form, some training by local brigade officers and you were out contributing, albeit under close supervision.
4. Many of the active firefighters are now over 65 and are risking their health doing very arduous jobs. Previously, with crews of 3 or more these people would do the less arduous jobs such as driving and communications. Now, with crews of often just 1-2 people these people are outside the truck and battling the fires: a physically very demanding activity. Similarly, we would rotate crews to provide reasonable breaks. Again, inappropriate regulation exacerbates these problems: previously trucks were designed to allow us to fight fires from a protected crew area (at very low speeds). These are now banned, so crews are on foot and closer to the fire, greatly increasing their physical stress and risk of injury.
5. The lack of firefighters is reaching a crisis point with brigades struggle to raise crews to respond to wildfires. See attached newspaper article which describes one example: a recent small incident in Nome 20 minutes south of Townsville. In summary, up to six aircraft were deployed and volunteers called from as far away as Pentland because there were too few local (QFRS approved) firefighters. Fire conditions were mild. In the recent past, wildfires have occurred many times in this area and been quickly handled by the local brigade, usually without assistance from other brigades and never with aerial support. This is now a regular problem in the area as brigades struggle to raise even a small crew, which increases response times and greatly increases the likelihood of a small fire becoming severe- which needs yet more crews.
6. Mandatory blue-cards, or rather the poor handling of the issue by QRFS management, resulted in the loss of thousands of volunteers. To this day it has not been explained why every volunteer must have

child-minding certification. We were simply ordered by QRFS management to “sign it or else” with no attempt at explanation, mediation etc. For many, it was the last straw in a long line of similar over-regulation applied by a distant and heavy-handed management. Many who already had the certs (which are time consuming to get and maintain) were so disgusted that they simply didn’t sign and were quietly dropped from active service. Others were banned from brigade vehicles and stations, effectively sacking them, but keeping them on the books, thus hiding the true extent of losses. Often these were life-long volunteers. The requirement also puts off many potential new members who often appear to be overwhelmed by the paperwork and probably resent the invasion of their privacy.

7. Volunteers are unable to voice concerns about the organisation as they are now considered to be (unpaid) members of the Queensland public service and ruled by its Code of Conduct. There are the standard annual public service surveys, but these are not appropriate for volunteers, with most questions centred around the code of conduct. After many years of raising these concerns internally, I wrote to my local newspaper in 2023 (attached) and was subsequently threatened by QRFS management for breaking the “Code of Conduct” (emails can be supplied). At the time, they did not have the power to dismiss, but changes to legislation in 2024 mean that they now do have that power to dismiss any “employee” who questions their management or raises legitimate safety concerns.

#### Solutions:

The demise in volunteer firefighting could be addressed by returning control to the local brigades and communities and winding back the large QRFS bureaucracy. As in the recent past, brigades would be supported and coordinated by a small number of paid staff with an emphasis on support rather than regulation. Apologising to the long-serving volunteers who were so badly treated would help to restore faith in the movement, while relaxing the mandatory child-minding certs would boost numbers of firefighters.

However, getting the bureaucracy to downsize and wind back regulations is probably not feasible. Also, the public service model is not suited to volunteer organisations that arguably require a more democratic and less hierarchical structure. Volunteers are not paid staff and need to be treated differently! Community-run brigades could instead be supported and co-ordinated by a statewide NGO. A democratically elected board, with government representation, would manage a relatively small number of paid employees. Paid employees would provide support (e.g. onsite equipment supply and maintenance), fundraising and co-ordination between brigades and the emergency services. This would result in substantial savings to the taxpayer: much of brigades’ funding already comes from rate levies and the large bureaucracy that has sprung up in recent years is actually counter-productive and not required. In addition, an NGO could also obtain corporate sponsorship, further reducing the drain on the taxpayer and strengthening the volunteer movement.

#### Conclusions

Without dramatic change, the volunteer firefighting movement in Queensland will continue to decline and ultimately be replaced by a paid service- at huge expense to the taxpayer and at a great loss for local communities. Many long-term members and even some senior QRFS managers believe this time is not far off. The decline is already endangering many communities and it is only a matter of time before severe loss of property and life occurs. The general community is largely unaware and any of us who speak up are dealt with severely by the QRFS management for “breaching the public service code of conduct”. I may be breaking the code by providing this submission.

Yours Sincerely



# Letters

## Volunteers smoked out

The recent fire near Alligator Creek has caused much community anxiety and cost taxpayers a fortune: up to three water bombing aircraft for over a week, and dozens of volunteers from as far away as Pentland (good on them!).

The system is so stretched that volunteers across the region were getting repeated urgent texts to respond, but there were so few that QFES resorted to using aerial bombing. And this was before the fire season proper started.

It wasn't always this way. The area has burned many times previously and often during much higher fire danger, but these fires were always quickly sorted by the local (Nome) brigade. They did this with little outside help and never with aerial water bombing.

However, a few years ago, most of these long-serving volunteers were sacked by QFES over a foolish

paperwork issue that was handled very badly. With them went hundreds of people-years' experience fighting local fires, working with property owners etc.

Full credit to the few new volunteers, but without the benefit of years of experience and numbers they have an uphill battle. I worry that this effort is not sustainable, particularly as the fire season is just starting. The few volunteers are already overworked and a huge amount has already been spent on aerial bombing.

In neighbouring brigades we also lost many volunteers over the paperwork issue, to the point where we are way overstretched.

In the past we had so many members there were arguments about who could go in the truck (seriously!), but we now struggle to get even a crew of two.

Getting new volunteers is also now very hard. People just glaze over when they see all the public service paperwork, regulations etc.

This is happening across the region. The volunteering system is frankly, broken.

This issue, and the volunteering crisis in general, has occurred as the system changed from being run by locally elected community groups, to being ruled by large public service bureaucracies in the cities. It's a complete clash of cultures and the paperwork issue is just one of many.

Many (most?!) paid public servants have trouble with all the bureaucratic BS, so it's no surprise the unpaid ones are voting with their feet!

We could fix this by returning control to the local communities with co-ordination and support via an NGO structure like Surf Lifesaving.

The alternative is that we will soon reach crisis point (arguably we just did), risking rural communities and costing taxpayers zillions of dollars from having aircraft and thousands of fully paid rural firefighters on call across the state 24/7.

## t the Editor

Melbourne Cup? Sydney to Hobart yacht race? CON, 4812.

Woke companies handing cash to something the majority of their

PM is just diverting attention from his own poor performance, back to his