

## **Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland**

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## **Biddaddaba Rural Fire Brigade Submission to the Volunteering in Queensland Inquiry**

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Submission Developed on Behalf of – Biddaddaba Rural Fire Brigade

Approval by – Executive Committee and First Officer of the Biddaddaba RFB

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The submission is prepared to address the issues and comments by the Officers, Fire Fighters and the Executive of the Biddaddaba Rural Fire Brigade (Biddaddaba RFB) into the Volunteering in Queensland Inquiry. The key points to be raised by the Brigade are as follows;

- **Focus of Rural Fire Fighters** - The focus on volunteer fire fighting and the Rural Fire Service (RFS) should be one of community support, however, we find that the focus by the new Queensland Fire Department (QFD) is more about implementing bureaucratic red tape to justify a fat middle management organisation introduced by the parent organisation, and getting rid of a system that worked very well, replacing it with a system that is difficult to work with, causes huge cost blow-outs for the tax payer and much longer waiting times for Brigades to purchase vital equipment necessary to keep our communities safe.
  - **Solution** - We need to refocus on the role of the RFS which is to support local communities and remove the emphasis on paid staff who are largely in their jobs for career progression and justifying their own existence.
- **Simplified Training** – the process for the conduct of basic training is not workable in its current form. The requirements of the Registered Training Organisation (RTO) means that to train a community member to work on the back of a fire truck as an entry level fire fighter can take up 12 months. This has led to a number of community members either not completing training or not joining the Brigade in the first place.
  - **Solution** – re-instate a process where basic training is delivered and conducted at the Brigade Level by brigade trainers without the input of the RTO. This will only be for entry level fire fighters to give them the ability to defend their community without long drawn out training processes. The RTO would become involved when personnel require training for promotion or to work outside of the group area.

- **Over Administration** – the recent changes made by Government to form the QFD have had a detrimental effect on the autonomy of the brigade and have basically said that QFD do not trust us as volunteers- this has manifested itself in a number of ways;
  - **Finance** – The brigade no longer has control over its own finances, the process put in place by QFD takes the ability of the brigade to run its own business away from the brigade and gives over-sight to administrators who are paid employees of QFD. This process has effectively demonstrated that QFD do not trust volunteers to run their own business.
    - **Solution** – Reinstate the old process and let Brigades run their finances and be responsible for conduct of Brigade Business, this process is still subject to audit of the books annually and has functioned well for many years.
  - **Finance** – Purchase of Equipment using funds raised by the brigade now requires QFD Approval if the purchase is over \$5000.00. Under the new QFD process the Brigade can no longer purchase equipment it deems necessary if the value of the equipment is greater than \$5000.00. Out of frustration we have members purchasing equipment with their own money and now struggling to be reimbursed, when the Brigade ran its own finances this would NEVER happen.
    - **Solution** – where the Brigade votes to purchase equipment using Brigade Funds this should be Brigade decision that does not require approval from personnel in Brisbane or at regional level.
  - **Middle Management** – the recent changes made by government to form QFD have had a flow on effect of increasing the numbers of Middle Management. Many of the newly appointed middle managers are not Bush Fire Fighters and have no concept of what Rural Fire Fighters do. This has been the direct cause of new trucks and equipment being purchased and supplied to Brigades with no training or communication on how to operate the equipment and adding the administrative burden of Brigades having to deal direct with the manufacturer to facilitate maintenance and breakdown support.
    - **Solution** – Make the Middle Managers accountable and link their performance to KPI's for the effectiveness of the support given.
- **Lack of Consultation** – the recent acquisition by the Biddaddaba RFB of a new fire truck, supplied by RFSQ was one of the first trucks to be issued based on the

new design. At no stage during the design, construction and procurement process were rural fire fighters or our paid regional managers consulted on the design, construction, equipping and rollout of these new fire fighting appliances, despite us being the first users of the vehicle in Queensland. This has contributed to a number of complaints to QFD about lack of consultation however the Middle Managers who were responsible for the procurement of the trucks remain silent.

- **Solution** – the procurement process must include a consultation and testing phase, especially when it comes to the procurement of items as critical as fire fighting appliances. Reference should be given to the consultative process undertaken by RFBAQ for the development of the Heavy Attack truck, this is an industry best practice example of procuring equipment. Not consulting the end user demonstrates a fundamental lack of respect for what Rural Fire Fighters do.
- **Miss -appropriation Of Tax Payers Money** - Cost of building and construction of Brigade Structures and resources – the Biddaddaba Rural Fire Brigade has been attempting to build a fire station for more than 3 years. The initial efforts to obtain a grant for the cost of the building was not successful and QFES approached us with funds to construct the building. At this stage the QFD Uplift Team became involved and we were instructed that the cost had blown out from \$100,000 to \$700,000 and that additional funds were required. At this stage Q Build became involved and the cost increased further to \$1.23 million. The Brigade has provided a recent quote from a local builder who has quoted us a build price of \$365,000.

This process has had a significant effect on the ability of the brigade to maintain a motivated working group of volunteers. As we have a new \$350,000 fire truck which we are having to park under a lean-to with open front and back on a farm where rats and birds can get to it this is unacceptable.

**Note the Beaudesert Group of fire brigades has sent a vote of no confidence in the finance model to QFD and have received no formal feedback on the No Confidence Motion after 3 months, this is un-acceptable behaviour.**

- **Solution** - If the community can build the structure in accordance with Qld Govt specifications at a fraction of the price then let us do it. **Note a royal commission should be conducted into Q Build.** This union run organisation does not represent the best interests of the Qld Tax Payer or of the Biddaddaba RFB.

- **Blue Cards** – the requirements for mandatory Blue Cards had a significant detrimental effect on Rural Fire Brigades. A number of older more experienced fire fighters did not wish to apply for the Blue Cards and hence took the opportunity to walk away from volunteering. It should be noted that in over 100 call out to fires in the last 5 years we have never had dealings with unsupervised children or vulnerable persons.
  - **Solution** - Remove the requirement for Blue Cards from Brigade members unless they agree to have one. Members without Blue Cards would not turn out to fires where unsupervised children or vulnerable persons may be involved.

**Conclusion** – The trend of losing volunteers will only continue if government does not start to address the influence of Woke Middle Management and a Queensland Fire Department that is focussed on Urban Fire Fighters and the needs of the Queensland Fire Fighters Union over the needs of the Volunteers who give their time for free and just want support to provide the best service to our communities that we can. In order to achieve this we would like to see the following;

1. **Give RFSQ it's own Commissioner with a direct line to the Minister and make the service a stand alone organisation;**
2. **Make the Middle Management Structure Fit For Purpose and link performance to KPI's, if it adds administrative burden to Rural Fire Brigades remove it;**
3. **Remove the WOKE agendas and treat everyone as a member of the RFSQ equally;**
4. **Allow our Paid Regional/District/Area Management and Support personnel to support us and limit the level of micro management that they are subject to, they understand the needs of Brigades better than anyone in QFD and they are let down by the Middle Management Organisation that is trying to justify its existence;**
5. **Trust us and show a bit of respect**
  - a. **Trust us to build sheds and infrastructure if we can do it better and cheaper than QFD.**
  - b. **Trust us to run brigade finances as we have always done.**
  - c. **Trust us to do the right thing by our communities and brigade members.**