

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

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Submission: Inquiry into Volunteering in Queensland

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I am writing this submission to the Inquiry in a private capacity as I do not have time to seek endorsement from the Bunya Mountains Rural Fire Brigade's Management Committee, (MC) however I understand the members would have endorsed this submission, as they have expressed their frustrations at numerous MC meetings over the last year. I will be raising two issues in particular, however I'm disappointed by the way the changes to the rural fire service have been implemented by the Queensland Government.

New Financial System

I sent emails to the acting Chief Fire Officer, copying in the QFES office in Kingaroy about the consequences of changing the finance system. I was told at a public meeting that the new financial system would reduce the workload on the Treasurer and the brigade in general. This has not been the case. Under the previous system the BMRFB operated a general operational account. With a bank in Kingaroy. This account allowed all purchases and reimbursements to be processed with minimal effort and workload. The Brigade approved a policy that allowed all members which held official position within the Brigade to make purchases using their own credit card up to a certain limit, such as items for the rural fire shed. Items over the limit required approval from MC. The treasurer would reimburse purchasers upon receiving receipts of items purchased and special approval if required. This allowed bank transfers to occur and within acceptable time frames. This system worked well and volunteer fire fighters were happy to make purchases using their credit cards knowing that they would be reimbursed in a timely manner.

BMRFB financial records were audited annually. Now the system requires me as treasurer to hold a Queensland Government debit card to make purchases, it is not suited to our operations, especially as Bunya Mts is remote and not easy to access a major centre. As treasurer I had to spend my time doing an on-line course managed by QFD and seek approval going through card approval process with Citicorp, the operators of the card. The reason I did this was to test the process and see if it met the Brigade needs and that I could encourage other volunteers to seek approval for a debit card.

At present I'm the only person within the Brigade who holds a card. I cannot undertake bank transfers and therefore cannot reimburse officers for purchases they have made. Now officers who make purchases need to fill out a QFD form and submit to Department's office in Kingaroy. Last week we were told the office was understaffed and could not promise a prompt response. Luckily we still have funds in our Operational Account (Brigade's account) and I can reimburse and pay our brigade bills.

Again, the new Department said they would consult, on the new system. I question the logic of starting a new finance system, when the system that was in place worked well. The new system has caused a lot of frustration and costs more time for both the treasurer and other officers in the BMRFB. It would be interesting for an independent audit to assess the cost of the new system with old system.

So this is my first example, demonstrating the lack of proper consultation and the way volunteers are treated in regard to changes brought about by the new finance system.

Toilet Facility

The installation of a new toilet facility at BMRFB shed has been an ongoing issue for the last 7 years. The brigade has been without a proper toilet over this time. Over that time the brigade has had to make do with an outside builder's toilet, which is pumped out as required. This facility is not suitable for fire fighters in general and is not suitable for people with a disability and does not have a shower. Note that the BM rural fire shed is also the designated disaster management centre. Considerable investment has occurred with additional funding from other organisations. South Burnett Regional Council recently purchased a generator for times when there is no power.

The Brigade has raised this matter numerous times with QFD, we have written to the current minister and the previous minister. In response to the first letter, senior officers from the QFD met with our Brigade in 2022 and assured us that QFES would manage the installation of the facility and keep the Brigade informed. This did not happen, so we wrote to the new Minister, whose policy adviser has advised there is another problem, however QFD is looking to address the problem. It seems to me little is being done and QFD can always find an excuse to keep whoever the Minister is at the time happy, while ignoring the brigade's problem. I assume that all QFD staff in Kedron office have proper toilet facilities, they do not need to use a builder's toilet. So as

volunteers the BMRFB has been treated extremely poorly, but there is an expectation that volunteers are still available to fight fires to save our rural communities.

Conclusion

I have provided two examples of QFD lack of proper consultation and refusal to acknowledge the brigade's concerns over changes and the treatment of BM's volunteer fire fighters as second rate citizens regarding basic amenities. I note article in Queensland Country Life news (20 Feb. 2025) by Justin Chovaeux, about the decrease in volunteer fire fighters. If the QFD continues to ignore the need for proper and meaningful consultation and prioritising issues effecting brigades the number of volunteers will continue to decrease. My recommendation is that a partnership arrangement needs to be put in place where volunteers are treated equality with Departmental staff and that immediate actions are taken to change the culture of the QFD.