

## **Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland**

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<b>Submitted by:</b>	Fergus Adrian
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Committee Secretary  
Local Government, Small Business and Customer Service Committee  
Parliament House  
George Street  
Brisbane QLD 4000

**Submission to the Local Government, Small Business and Customer Service Committee – inquiry into volunteering in Queensland.**

I am Fergus Adrian and I thank the Local Government, Small Business and Customer Service Committee for the opportunity to provide this submission.

I have been an active volunteer in my local community Rural Fire Brigade (RFB) for over 43 years. I have had various officer positions and currently First Officer with more than 12 years' experience. I have also retired from the then Queensland Fire and Emergency Services following 19 years of employment. During the period I have witnessed numerous reviews and changes, none though has had a more resounding negative effect on volunteering than the recent reform changes undertaken by the previous state government culminating in local community RFB's being transformed or nationalized into the Rural Fire Service Queensland (RFSQ) through orchestrated legislation.

As a volunteer addressing the Community Safety and Legal Affairs Committee inquiry into the Disaster Management and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2024, my treatment from the Acting Chairperson was extremely hurtful and intimidating to the extent that I felt respect for fellow volunteers impacted by this Bill was totally disregarded.

From my personal experience, the barriers or impediments to volunteering and or control of volunteers in the QFES reform process was experienced firstly at the level of a previous State Government committee. I sincerely hope this committee demonstrates greater respect and consideration to those who volunteer their time in this instance.

Volunteering in the community is rewarding especially when one's contribution results in a safer and more resilient community. The work of volunteers is never easy or done as social values change as society moves in time. Generations have varying priorities that impact on volunteering groups especially those who are called on in times of emergencies. The challenge for community volunteering groups is to keep in touch with their community and the address the expectations that are desired.

***Volunteers will experience more demands from the RFSQ now that brigades are directly a part of RFSQ and regulatory control.***

## **Leadership of Volunteers by Volunteers**

Additional impediments to volunteering as a First Officer and Management Committee member of the brigade is the demands, expectations, changes to policy without consultation by the RFSQ. Permissions are also debilitating as well as the financial control mechanism brought about by nationalization of brigades.

I mentioned in a previous submission that as a First Officer, one is committed to the understanding and application of leadership and motivation, knowledge of individual attributes of brigade volunteers, social and politics of the local community. In addition, there is an expectation that as a First Officer that I have knowledge and application of over 70 pages of the *Fire Service Act 1990*, more than 300 pages of the Rural Fire Brigade Manual and another 200 pages of operational policy and guidelines. The First Officer is also responsible for the safety and training of volunteers so they can conduct duties in accordance to RFSQ requirements and for the volunteer's welfare, health and safety.

***Policy and procedures need refinement and collaboration prior to implementation in a volunteer working environment.***

*The changes to the legislation policy and procedures have not provided any more protection to the First Officer or brigade volunteer after the 1<sup>st</sup> July 2024 than prior to the 31<sup>st</sup> June 2024.*

## **Organisational Leadership of RFSQ**

It is astounding that the Chief Officer of RFSQ does not require knowledge and experience in volunteer motivation and coordination of volunteers and where that requirement aligns with permanent staff of RFSQ towards supporting volunteers.

The *Fire Service Act 1990* (as of 30 August 2024)

Part 4 7Q appointment of a Chief Officer

- (2) A person is eligible for appointment as chief officer only if the person has—
- (a) rural firefighting experience; or
  - (b) rural incident control expertise; or
  - (c) rural fire prevention expertise.

The requisite conditions of The Chief Officer of the RFSQ who is the leader of more than 26,000 volunteers does not need to have sound knowledge and experience in the motivation and coordination of volunteer/volunteer groups is preposterous. Without question, the largest single volunteer organisation in Queensland.

I can recall a comment during my employment that in passing an RFS staff group “my job would be easier without volunteers”.

***Volunteers must have a leadership that truly demonstrates and values the role of volunteers, their attributes, capabilities and capacity.***

Volunteers were shunted in the legislation review and subsequent policy development. Contrary to the so called “town hall meetings”, there was very little chance for volunteer input and if so outcomes were managed in favor of a controlling autocratic bureaucratic mechanism with a single outcome of regulatory control of brigade, volunteer membership, equipment and finances.

*Volunteer engagement, provisions, questions in part were either used to safeguard organisation decisions or if responded to were meaningless.*

***RFSQ failed in process to follow the organisation shared values of Respect, Integrity, Courage, Loyalty and Trust towards the volunteer.***

Rural Fire Brigades and their volunteer membership consists of a diverse collection with experience in industry, professions, businesses, primary producing and land management practices. Volunteers with academic qualifications, business acumen and importantly land management practitioners with bushcraft skills including first nations people have all contributed. The advance of rural fire brigades over the past 75 years is mainly a result of the collective resourcefulness of the volunteers rather than the department they were associated with.

Current actions and nationalization of RFB into the RFSQ (a government department) will stifle the advances needed at the local community level to support and make safe the community whether it be developed rural, rural or remote isolated communities.

Latest policy, regulations, rules and procedures are bureaucratic control centric and provide further barriers to volunteering.

Community members wanting to join a RFB now have to wait up to 12 weeks through a convoluted process. We have an existing member of a RFB in another region waiting some 8 weeks to confirm dual membership in our brigade.

***Rural Fire Brigades and their volunteer membership need to be community owned and focused independent with their own funding arrangements and supported in partnership with RFSQ.***

## **Funding**

There are so many small but contributing factors, however the financial management process has really impacted on the volunteer especially those volunteers who have long-term commitment to the financial status of their respective brigade.

The current funding arrangements instigated by RFSQ is a total insult to volunteers. The RFSQ without consultation with brigades that collect the rural fire levy contacted Local Government and redirected the funds collected on behalf of Brigades by Local Government into the RFSQ account indicating that the funds went into the individual brigade account held by RFSQ. As RFSQ is not a registered financial banking institution in holding more than 1,300 separate accounts the funds must be in one single RFSQ account with ledger

recordings. Again, volunteers were misguided on the procedures and values of Trust, Respect and Integrity.

Policy and regulatory regards place more work and accountability on the volunteer. Brigades and in particular are now restricted in purchasing local services and delayed payment by RFSQ has placed volunteers in unusual predicaments with local community business and suppliers.

***RFB cannot now invest in short term deposits to build funds for improvements to support their activities in making local communities safe.***

There was no decent two-way consultation with brigades regarding the reform outcomes, as if so alternative measures could have been instigated to leave brigades as a community incorporated entity giving greater protection and ownership to volunteers.

Many long-term volunteers are concerned and frustrated by the latest changes.

The Rural Fire Brigade network is the collective of a most significant and unique group of people who have a strong desire to protect their community, their industry, their family from unwanted bushfire and other emergencies. The Social Capital created by volunteers is a considerable and valuable commodity that needs support in the appropriate manner.

*The RFSQ needs separation from the QFD to be its own volunteer department isolated from other industrial bias influences.*

*Rural Fire Brigades need to be supported as community based and owned entities.*

I do sincerely thank the Committee for the time to view the contents of the submission and would welcome the opportunity to be asked questions on this matter.

Kind Regards



Fergus Adrian AFSM

