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INQUIRY INTO THE MANAGEMENT OF RURAL FIRE SERVICES IN QUEENSLAND

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

MONDAY, 23 AUGUST 2010

Cairns

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Committee met at 2.01 pm

EDMISTONE, Mr Leslie, Chief Executive Officer, Etheridge Shire Council

MILLER, Mr Robert, Acting Senior Ranger, Cairns/Mareeba Subdistrict, Department of Environment and Resource Management

STALLBAUM, Mr Brett, Operations Manager, Queensland Parks and Wildlife, Department of Environment and Resource Management

STAFFORD, Mr Adrian, Acting Superintendent, Acting Regional Manager Rural Operations, Queensland Fire and Rescue Service

WESTON, Mr Wayne, Assistant Commissioner, Queensland Fire and Rescue Service

CHAIR: Good afternoon, everyone. It is great to see you here. Thanks for coming along. My name is Wayne Wendt and I am the chair of the committee. The other members of the committee here today are Mr Ian Rickuss MP, the deputy chair and member for Lockyer; Mr Michael Crandon MP, the member for Coomera; Ms Di Farmer MP, the member for Bulimba; Ms Mary-Anne O'Neill MP, the member for Kallangur; and Mrs Christine Smith MP, the member for Burleigh. Unfortunately one of our members, Mr Ray Hopper, the member for Condamine, could not make it this afternoon, so he sends his apologies.

I declare this session of the public hearings of the Public Accounts and Public Works Committee's inquiry into the management of rural fire services in Queensland officially open. This hearing is a formal proceeding of the parliament and is subject to the Legislative Assembly's standing rules and orders. The committee will not require witnesses to give evidence under oath, but I remind you that intentionally misleading the committee is a serious offence.

Could witnesses please be mindful that when they wish to make a statement they speak into the microphone. Could I also request that mobile phones be turned off. You have previously been provided with a copy of the instructions for witnesses, so we will take those as read. Hansard will record the proceedings and you will be provided with the transcript.

We are running this hearing as a round table format to facilitate discussion. However, for reasons of privilege, only members of the committee can put questions to witnesses. If you wish to raise issues for discussion, I want to stress that you must direct your comments through me as the chair.

I also remind all those participating in the hearing today that these proceedings are similar to parliament to the extent that the public cannot participate in the proceedings. In this regard, I remind members of the public that under the standing orders the public may be admitted to or excluded from the hearing at the discretion of the committee.

Before we start, I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your submissions in response to the committee's discussion paper, and we will examine some of the issues raised during the course of this hearing. Would you like to make some brief opening statements in relation to each department? Wayne, are you going to make a statement?

Assistant Commissioner Weston: No.

CHAIR: You have not thought about it?

Assistant Commissioner Weston: The submission that was put forward by the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service is what we will be basing our discussion on today.

CHAIR: Les? No. What about you, Brett?

Mr Stallbaum: No. I have not been given any instructions to make any comment on behalf of the department.

CHAIR: Various members will ask questions. Please answer them as best you can. If you have any concerns about those questions, please put them forward. I should also mention that Les has pointed out that he has to be away by three o'clock. So we will ask Les some questions early and go from there. We do appreciate you taking the time out today, because I know how busy you all are. It is great to see Les here, because I know many of the other councils were provided with the opportunity but unfortunately, for one reason or another, have not attended. So for that reason we are especially thankful to you, Les, and your council. I will hand over to the deputy chair to ask the first question.

Mr RICKUSS: Thanks for coming, gentlemen. It is good to see you here. Les, the Etheridge Shire Council is a fairly big rural council to the west of us here. How many rural fire brigades does the shire council have within its shire district?

Mr Edmestone: Three.

Mr RICKUSS: What do you see are the major issues facing the rural fire brigades in your local area?

Mr Edmestone: I believe it is the tyranny of distance, the low population and the fact that Etheridge shire is 40,000-plus square kilometres, so most of the fires are four hours from nowhere. The rural fire brigades rely heavily on council to support them. The funding mechanism for rural fire brigades in remote areas that have a sparse population, under section 126 of the act, is for them to approach council to put a levy on the rates. But because we have such a large land area and a low population, it is not really viable for rural fire brigades to do that.

Mr RICKUSS: What do you do? Do you take it out of general revenue, then? When you have got a system, do you?

Mr Edmestone: We basically provide in-kind support to the rural fire brigades when there is an event, whether it is our shire or neighbouring shires, for the benefit of our constituents.

Mr RICKUSS: What is the biggest town in Etheridge shire?

Mr Edmestone: Georgetown.

Mr RICKUSS: Is there a town fire service there?

Mr Edmestone: There are rural fire brigades in Georgetown, Forsayth and Einasleigh at the moment.

Mr RICKUSS: So you do not actually have a red-truck fire service at all in the whole shire?

Mr Edmestone: No.

Mr RICKUSS: Do you attend many road accidents?

Mr Edmestone: Yes. That is probably the primary function of the rural fire brigades, assisting SES for rollovers and accidents. The secondary function is probably the fire season. We are in the Wet Tropics, so we have definite wet and dry seasons. So if you had a good wet season the previous year then in the dry you have high fuel loads.

Mr RICKUSS: So you have a three-month window or six-month window of fire seasons?

Mr Edmestone: Yes, September through to December.

Mr RICKUSS: That is your big window?

Mr Edmestone: That is the high-risk time.

Mr RICKUSS: When do the accidents occur? Are they more through the winter?

Mr Edmestone: It is random. You cannot really peg it down. They do have a fairly high accident load.

Mr RICKUSS: You were telling us earlier about a road train that rolled over. Could you tell us more about that?

Mr Edmestone: Last year we had a road train go over on the Gulf Development Road west of Georgetown. The end trailer flipped in a gully and it was full of LPG. So when the bottles broke all the gas sat in the low point, so we could not have any sparks or flames. The council had to go out and assist SES and rural fire to right the truck and remove all this stuff with their heavy equipment.

Mr RICKUSS: They are the sorts of things you are dealing with in rural Australia.

CHAIR: Before you go, Les, do you have any urban or auxiliary stations within the council?

Mr RICKUSS: I have asked that.

CHAIR: I know you said 'rural', but I did not hear the question.

Mr RICKUSS: I asked about red trucks.

Ms O'NEILL: My questions are to the Department of Community Safety. It is a three-pronged question. The committee understands that there are four types of brigade classifications: ione, village, rural and primary industry. What are the major types of brigades that you have in the northern region? What are the unique aspects of those classifications? How do the requirements for rural fire services up here differ from those in other parts of the state? I am happy to repeat those questions. I just wanted to let you know that there are three parts. The first is: what are the major types of brigades that you have up here?

Supt Stafford: It is probably relevant for me to mention that I am acting in the role and have done for only four weeks. My background is urban. Some of the questions from a rural point of view might be a little difficult for me to answer, but I will do the best I can. We do have a mix. I could not tell you exactly what the mix is. I would not want to guess at it. I realise that my statement is going to be in *Hansard*, so I

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could not tell you off the top of my head what the numbers are in relation to the variety of brigade types. I can tell you that there are 192 different rural fire brigades throughout the region consisting of about 4,466 volunteers. The region consists of an area of 176,458 square kilometres. That is to put it in some context.

CHAIR: From where to where?

Supt Stafford: From Cardwell to TI and west roughly to just before Normanton.

Mr RICKUSS: How many auxiliaries do you have?

Assistant Commissioner Weston: We have 25 urban based stations within the region and 23 of those have auxiliaries attached. There are two permanent stations here in Cairns that do not have auxiliaries attached, but they are predominantly in that coastal range area. They only go as far west as Ravenshoe. That is the furthest west. The most northern is Thursday Island. We have one on Thursday Island which supports the whole Torres Strait area. So that is the auxiliary side.

Just to follow on from Adrian's point, predominantly the rural brigades are the primary producer type brigades. As Adrian said, we do have a mix. We have quite a number of izone areas, particularly on the Tablelands and the coastal fringe. We have some small village brigades but not much in the way of village brigades. It is predominantly primary producer brigades.

Ms O'NEILL: Do you want to expand on the unique differences or are you happy with what you have already said?

CHAIR: The differences between what you do here and what they might do in South-East Queensland.

Assistant Commissioner Weston: I guess the primary producer brigades across the state are predominantly west of the divide. I think they are all very similar in that they have a common interest in the primary production, the environment that they live in and their properties. I do not think there is anything different there. Probably the biggest difference between the Far North and probably the south-east corner is the population and the growth that is happening down in that part of the world and the change and the demand that that is bringing to some of the rural areas. We mentioned in our submission how we are going to deal with that demand that is placed on the volunteer part of the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service. That is probably the biggest thing for the south-east corner.

Mr RICKUSS: Accidents still make up a fair percentage of your work as auxiliaries?

Assistant Commissioner Weston: Definitely. Accidents would be the second highest call rate for us outside of alarms in this style of building that we are in today.

Ms FARMER: My question is to the Department of Community Safety. The Auditor-General found in his audit that there are not robust and systematic processes to identify the nature and level of brigade activity to help you allocate resources according to risk and need. How do you assess the needs of rural fire brigades?

Supt Stafford: Again, in the document I think there is some risk profiling of areas to determine service delivery. But the forming of a rural fire brigade is dependent on the community itself. They make the determination as to whether or not they require a rural fire brigade. The rural fire brigade in its own right is not a state entity, whereas Queensland Fire and Rescue Service is. The Queensland Fire and Rescue Service has a rural operations arm that provides governance and guidance and support to rural fire brigades. So the formation of rural fire brigades depends a lot on the community and whether or not they are prepared to put together a brigade or whether they identify a need such that they require a group of people to address the risk within their community.

Ms FARMER: What sort of information do they provide you so that you know whether you are supporting them appropriately?

Supt Stafford: I would find it difficult to answer that question given the length of time I have been in the role. They usually interact heavily with the inspector level. The inspectors of the rural fire brigade operations are out and about with the communities and the rural fire brigades quite a bit. They will put through a request after some contact. The inspector would go out and talk to the group and outline what issues they would have to address and how they go about forming the brigade. Then support is provided for rural operations. So far as data capture and those sorts of issues—

Ms FARMER: It is probably less about the set-up of a new rural brigade and more about once they are in existence. How is that information systematically provided?

Supt Stafford: Yes. That is where we attempt to gain as much information as we can from brigades. The organisation is putting in systems to assist brigade members to support that so that we understand what their needs are and can respond to them. Without the data we cannot, obviously. But there is still some work to do to encourage people to ensure that data flows through. There is also an understanding that volunteers have their own life; they have their work and all the rest of it. We are conscious of the demands that are put on the volunteers. But it is a cycle that we need them to engage with so that we can better support their activities as a brigade.

Ms FARMER: When volunteers are asked, on top of the work that they are doing in the rural fire brigade, to provide data, do you think they feel that the data they provide is used by the department and not just stored somewhere? Does the department actually use that data to make decisions about how to allocate resources?

Supt Stafford: I can only speculate. In the position I am in, I would be hopeful that it did. I would expect that you get a cross-section of responses in relation to that. I suspect that more proactive brigades may be happy to engage in the whole process so they understand how the outcomes come to fruition from the data collection. Then there is the possibility that other brigades are probably not so engaged in that process so they do not completely understand.

Assistant Commissioner Weston: We certainly use that information when we are looking at areas that have grown to the extent that we might need to consider a different model of delivery, moving from rural into a urban type service delivery. All that information that Adrian is talking about becomes vital at that point—when we are looking at the risk and how it has grown and what we need to do for the future. An example is whether it is time to transition that brigade across to an urban model. When we are talking about volunteers, whilst auxiliaries are paid for their time they are still essentially volunteers. That is another challenge for us. I know that is not what the committee is here for, but I want to make that distinction.

Ms FARMER: It is an intrinsic part of what you are dealing with.

Assistant Commissioner Weston: The auxiliaries are volunteers, in essence. They still have another job. They respond in the bigger centres.

Ms FARMER: Yes. Thank you.

Mrs SMITH: I would like to follow up with the Department of Community Safety. The audit also found that there is a lack of an appropriate system to monitor the condition and safety of rural fire brigade equipment. Can you tell us what systems the department has in place to monitor this equipment?

Assistant Commissioner Weston: I know that the rural operations have conducted an audit of all their stations and their appliances. Over the last four to five years there has been a significant change made with the appliances to bring them up to acceptable standards. That will be an ongoing process, I guess, given that the brigades fund their activities and it will take some time to do that. As to where we are moving in the future, the commissioner is looking at what we can do to support the rural brigades in the future in that area.

Mrs SMITH: Is the department involved locally in the allocation of equipment across the various rural fire brigades?

Assistant Commissioner Weston: Certainly the brigades put their requests through to their inspectors, who consider those requests. Then it is dependent on funding and, I suppose, the risk level of the brigade and what they get funded for.

Supt Stafford: The organisation will subsidise the acquisition of types of equipment. When it comes to appliances, there is a shared funding arrangement where the brigades are required to contribute 20 per cent to acquire the appliance and the state government provides the remaining 80 per cent to acquire that appliance.

Mrs SMITH: Les, could I ask you if council is involved in any way in allocating funds or equipment?

Mr Edmestone: I mentioned this previously. Under the act, rural fire brigades can come to council and ask us to put a levy on the rates. Unfortunately, in a shire like Etheridge shire there are only 600 assessments. It is very hard to get a return that would be of benefit to the rural fire brigades with that sparse population. Council assists as best it can to the needs of the rural fire brigades. We have no avenue of getting any of that money back. It is done with the goodwill of the elected members to assist their constituents.

Mr CRANDON: My question is to the Department of Environment and Resource Management. The committee has received a number of submissions discussing communication issues with government agencies. Could you advise the committee how the department communicates its policies and procedures directly to the rural fire brigades?

Mr Stallbaum: In relation to the rural fire brigades?

Mr CRANDON: Yes. It is a criticism, if you like. The committee has received a number of submissions discussing communication issues with government agencies. There is a criticism that has come through from the rural fire brigades. Could you please advise the committee how the department communicates its policies and procedures directly to rural fire brigades?

CHAIR: What relationships do you have?

Mr RICKUSS: If you have a rural fire brigade outside your park somewhere—be it 20, 30, 40 or 50 kilometres—and you are going to light up, do you contact them to tell them that you are going to light up?

Mr Stallbaum: Yes. I will defer to my colleague Rob Miller, who has more of an operational understanding of that, and perhaps I can add something to that.

Mr Miller: Over the last few years we have established fire management committees based on rural areas or wherever they are. They are a seasonal thing. So prior to the fire season we talk about areas that we are going to burn. Then during the season we talk about areas that we have burnt. So there is constant communication between all of the brigades with people like me, other members of DERM or various other councils.

Mr CRANDON: How do you communicate specifically with the rural fire brigades? Do you communicate with them by mail? Do you have meetings with them? How is it that you communicate with the rural fire brigades?

Mr Miller: Prior to specific events, it is just a procedure of ringing everyone on the list—say, fire wardens, neighbours and those sorts of people—through the fire management committees. That is on a local basis.

Mr Stallbaum: I suppose what Rob is trying to articulate is that we have the fire management referral groups, and they are at the planning stage for our operational burns—what we call our planned burns. We will have a series of planned burns scoped out for an entire year. So we will know reasonably well when we are going to deliver them and who is exactly involved in that. There will be a number of people—fire brigades, neighbours to the actual burns, traditional owners and park staff—involved in the delivery of that burn. When that becomes operational and we go out to deliver it, there will be a contact list associated with that planned burn. The planned burn will be an actual document that has been vetted and approved through the hierarchy in Parks and Wildlife and we go out and deliver that. Before we deliver it operationally, we ring the stakeholders and say, 'Yes, we are going to burn. This is the situation.' You may have a pre-burn meeting to go out and make an assessment—establish what the fuel loads are at a given time, that the weather conditions are okay and that all the stakeholders are cool with what is going on. Then we go out and deliver it with a multidisciplinary approach.

Mr CRANDON: Thank you. To the Department of Community Safety I ask the same question. How do you communicate your policies and procedures to the rural fire brigades?

Supt Stafford: In the role of rural operations, providing guidance of governance to rural fire brigades, there are things such as the rural fire brigade manual, state-wide integrated operations planning processes, that are provided for brigades so they have an understanding of what their requirements are, what their role is and how they undertake that role. In relation to communications on the ground during operations—that is another element of communications, obviously—we are just going through a state-wide process of programming all our VHF radios so that it is a little easier and clearer for the people on the ground to establish those communications with DERM, Parks and Wildlife and the like.

Assistant Commissioner Weston: Obviously we have a volunteer portal on our website which the volunteers can access at any time. Important issues and policy procedures can be got through that portal. The inspectors for the Rural Fire Service travel around regularly to all their brigades. Part of their role as they are travelling is obviously to communicate to the brigade members any changes or updates or policy direction of the Rural Fire Service as well as bring back information from those brigades. I think one of the most important parts is that our inspectors are probably the ones who communicate directly with the volunteers. That is an important role for them to communicate.

We run state forums for volunteers where we get state representatives of volunteer groups together every two years. That is an opportunity for networking for the commissioner, senior management and the assistant commissioner of rural operations to meet with a whole range of volunteers and put forward what is happening in the service—the changes and benefits—and also to hear the concerns of the volunteer groups. There are routine emails that we use. I think we all use them these days; they are sometimes a bit overused. I think the most vital one and the one that works best is direct communication between the inspectors and the brigades. Obviously the rural fire brigades have their volunteer fire brigade association, which is another line of communication for their membership.

Supt Stafford: In support of the inspectors also, there are area training support officers and brigade training officers who go out into the brigade areas and provide training and support to brigades.

CHAIR: We have been talking about the issue of controlled burns and the discussion that goes on between the various groups. Do you have any controlled burns in our region?

Mr Edmestone: We do have controlled burns to reduce fuel load.

CHAIR: And you are involved in those things? We have heard about what is going on between these guys and the landholders.

Mr Edmestone: Normally the council is not involved. The council normally comes in when it is a natural fire, not a planned fire.

CHAIR: How do you view that? Is that satisfactory from your perspective?

Mr Edmestone: As I said, council tries to assist the Rural Fire Service wherever we can. If the rural fire members wanted the council involved they would have no hesitation in asking us.

CHAIR: So you are quite comfortable with the arrangement?

Mr Edmestone: Most of the rural fire members are either local business owners or council employees. You will find that the members of the Rural Fire Service are also members of the SES. Because we have a low population base, everybody jumps in and helps.

CHAIR: I was going to go back to the department, Wayne. A number of submissions we received identified conflict between the urban and rural brigades in terms of both their funding and also call-outs at interface zones, particularly in izone areas. Is this an issue in the local area? Is their conflict between you guys in a urban and rural sense in relation to some of the call-outs?

Assistant Commissioner Weston: Occasionally there is the odd conflict, but it is rare up in this part of the world. We have a very good working relationship between the two sections—rural and urban. We need to; we need each other. It is not as though we are separate entities; we are the one agency and we work under the one commissioner. People being people, you are going to have the odd conflict.

In terms of the call-out system through our Firecom unit in Cairns, we have worked very hard over many years to tailor that to suit the needs of the rural brigades. We have an excellent system here where we support the rural brigades fully with whatever they need. All they need to do is call on their radio and we provide those resources through whatever channel is needed.

CHAIR: Does that work the other way, then? If you have a fire and they come to assist you, is there any type of reimbursements for them? How does that work?

Assistant Commissioner Weston: Yes, I can give an example from last year, which was probably the worst fire season in Queensland history. We had quite a number of fires on the Tablelands, which is our biggest risk in this part of the world. Our friends from DERM and others would know this as we were all there together. When the rural brigade are called in to support us, we always feed them and look after them on the fire ground with welfare type issues. And when they have completed the operation, if they have used their own appliances we always refuel them before they go home. Basically, they are not out of pocket due to any expenses they have. That is an arrangement that we have had for many years. That happens across the state. We support them.

We do need the rural brigades to support urban brigades with their equipment. They have the smaller vehicles and are able to access some of the areas that we cannot. Even though it might be an urban fire district under the legislation, we still need some of the rural brigade to support us. And, vice versa, they need the urban brigades with the larger appliances for structures, road crash rescue and hazmat.

CHAIR: So they can ask you guys to stand by in case there is a rural fire coming towards a home or a structure?

Assistant Commissioner Weston: Yes, regularly we do that.

CHAIR: Is there any cost associated with that?

Assistant Commissioner Weston: No, there has not been. We have reciprocal arrangements with them. We did do that a number of times last year when there were fires that possibly could have threatened structures. Our urban appliances were just based around the structures and the rural brigade controlled the wildfire.

CHAIR: Who is in charge in that situation?

Assistant Commissioner Weston: Generally in that case it would be the rural officer if he was the first one there. The urban brigade is only supporting their activities. The rural officer would stay in charge. If that was the scenario and that structure caught fire, they would probably sectorise it and then the urban officer would take charge of the structure fire but still be under the control of the incident controller.

CHAIR: How does the department determine when rural fire brigade assistance is required? Looking at it from the other angle now—from your angle—who identifies that they are needed?

Assistant Commissioner Weston: The rural brigades can call through Firecom and ask for assistance in whatever way they need. Firecom will act upon that. That happens every day of the year for the rural brigades. When we are in the fire season and there are heightened levels of activity, Adrian, in his role as the regional manager of rural operations, and I would talk to each other every day about the season and what is going on. If something did occur, we would have the regional operations coordination centre running. We would be making plans. We would have contingency plans in place for where we can support each other and help. That would include bringing volunteers and others from other parts of the state if need be or, vice versa, us sending our people to other parts of the state. It is partnership cooperatively. We work together at all times. We are based in the one office and we talk every day of the week about what is going on. It is not as though either of us is operating in isolation. We work together at all times.

Supt Stafford: We have a wildfire plan for the region as well. That plan sets what wildfire alert levels would exist within the season. That is communicated twice a day—morning and night—through Firecom. People throughout the region can then be prepared relative to wildfire alert level. Where we have set a higher wildfire alert level within a certain zone within the region then, regardless of whether it is rural volunteer, urban auxiliary or permanents, they are all aware of their level of preparedness and what their response should be. They are all on the same page in terms of the current risk for their zone. Wayne and I discuss that. We set those levels based on a variety of information we get—weather, fuel et cetera.

Mr Stallbaum: Each week we make an assessment on our preparedness level. We use the information that the rural fire brigade comes up with to establish what that baseline is. In support of the other fire services, we are all singing off the same sheet.

CHAIR: That is what we like to hear.

Mr RICKUSS: Brett, does your gear match up with rural fires' gear? At one stage you had different Camlock fittings on your gear.

Mr Stallbaum: We have smaller equipment. We do not have the red trucks or the yellow trucks but we have 500-litre slip-on units that go onto four-wheel drives.

Mr RICKUSS: You can transfer water between each other and that sort of thing?

Mr Miller: Yes, that is correct.

Mr RICKUSS: At one stage there was a difference. My question is to Wayne. The Auditor-General found that there was no systemic process for ensuring that individual brigade issues are understood and considered by the department. How does the north manage this issue locally?

Assistant Commissioner Weston: As I said before, Adrian and I regularly sit down and talk about issues going on in the region and work through it that way. We work through the chain of command if need be to go further, but if not we resolve issues locally. We have regular meetings with all the senior managers in the region—the urban inspectors and rural inspectors. We sit down and talk about issues. Issues do come up. We will resolve those issues locally wherever we can. If it is more of a state issue, obviously it needs to go to the state for some direction and a consistent approach. That is the partnership we have. We have a very good working relationship between all of us in this region. We try to sit down together and work the problem through.

Mr RICKUSS: Undoubtedly, Wayne, you have worked around the state?

Assistant Commissioner Weston: Yes.

Mr RICKUSS: Do you feel there is an effective process up in the top end?

Assistant Commissioner Weston: The relationship in the Far North is excellent. We get on with it. I guess our focus is on providing these services to the community. At the end of the day, that is what we are here for—that is, to serve the community and to make sure they are safe. I suppose in some ways when we respond we may have failed in some way because we are hoping to have safer communities. If we could reduce fires it would be even better.

Mr RICKUSS: I can understand how it probably works a bit better up here. There are smaller populations and most people are going to know the people they are dealing with at the rural and urban facilities.

Assistant Commissioner Weston: Some years ago I was an inspector in the rural service so I have good understanding. I know Les's area very well. I have since moved into the urban stream.

Supt Stafford: There are a couple of things. In terms of conflict between urban and rural brigades, I would like to put on the record that we encourage the improvement of interoperability where the interface exists. We encourage the senior officers and inspectors to create situations where combined training events can take place to build rapport and improve relationships to ensure that when we do have to respond together—

CHAIR: So we are talking about rural and urban now?

Supt Stafford: On the interface. Certainly in my role I encourage the rural inspectors to create opportunities whereby we can have combined training events so we have the rural volunteers and the urban auxiliary or urban permanents together with the intention of improving relationships and building rapport. So when they have to work together they know each other and can respect their positions in the organisation and achieve the desired outcomes.

I would like to make a point about the relationship between the inspectors and rural fire brigades. They do a lot of communicating out there, as Wayne alluded to before. Both inspectors are out today. One is up at the cape and one is out near Croydon talking to the brigade groups. That process creates an opportunity for the inspectors to understand firsthand some of the issues being faced by the brigades. They can therefore respond to and support the brigades by providing information back through the system to be responded to where it needs to be.

Ms O'NEILL: My question is to Brett and Rob in the first instance. Earlier we heard how the Department of Community Safety, local agencies and rural fire brigades all work together. Did you want to comment on how you guys fit into that?

Mr Stallbaum: We will have a joint exercise, and that exercise may involve the rural fire brigade, the metro fire brigade, the council, the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service, neighbours and traditional owners. There would be any number of those depending on how large the burn is or how large the exercise is. There was one run earlier this year. One of the fire services took the lead in that. We were involved in a component of that.

We held one just recently down at Gordonvale where it was out on the ground. Everyone who has any degree of involvement with firefighting is being involved in it. Sometimes there will be planned burns by the Cairns Regional Council, the Tablelands Regional Council or the Cassowary Coast Regional Council on their tenure but we will be involved because it may border on our country as well. It may just be the case that they need a bit of support. If a request comes along, we have a look at it and certainly try to help out from that perspective.

That then means that we know people, we know the equipment—that is, you are familiar with the other equipment—and they know they can rely on us and we can rely on them when it comes to having to activate to fight wildfires.

Ms O'NEILL: Les, did you want to comment on that?

Mr Edmestone: To put it bluntly, it does work very well this side of the Great Divide. Once you step over the Great Divide into the never-never of the gulf, the Savannah and the west, I do not know that there is as much in terms of activity. I know the feeling of our rural fire people is that they put their hands in their own pockets to do things quite regularly. That was mentioned in the submission the council put in.

When this came up, I did not put in the submission that I went and talked to the rural people. I sat down with them and said, 'What do you think? Do we put in a submission? Do we not put in a submission? Are their problems in these areas?' That is how the submission was formulated. It is difficult because most of the population is on the coastal extremities and not out in rural areas. The rural people do need assistance. I do not know how to fund that. Our council does what we can as much as we can to help them.

Ms O'NEILL: It is tricky to get satisfactory outcomes in the west?

Mr Edmestone: It seems to step over the divide. There are still people, just not as many.

Mr RICKUSS: So, Les, your council's point of view and your rural fires' point of view is that you have this vast area to look after but you are struggling in terms of the resources to manage that area in any realistic way? Really, what you want to say is that you are short of money and the council really cannot afford to spend a lot of money on it, yet there is an enormous slab of country that you are trying to look after and with these limited resources. Does that summarise it?

Mr Edmestone: Yes. If you look at the council's contribution, last year was a pretty big fire season. On one fire front we had two graders out there for two weeks. One grader was damaged while cutting breaks to protect properties and equipment. We do not get anything back for that at all.

Mr RICKUSS: For the end loader that went out to tip the truck back over, do you get something back from insurance for that?

Mr Edmestone: Nothing.

Mr RICKUSS: I imagine you could actually put in a claim for some sort of insurance compensation. In theory, the truckie's insurance would have that as a recovery operation. For nearly any accident that the council attends there should be some recovery funds. That is something that you would have to discuss with your councillors. It is a fact of life; people have insurance for that specific reasons. It would be nice to be able to say that we can give you half a million dollars a year to support your deeds but we cannot, unfortunately.

Ms FARMER: My question is to Community Safety again. What impact does urban encroachment have on the rural fire brigades?

Assistant Commissioner Weston: In the Far North we do not have any real large urban building into the rural areas. Predominantly it has been here on the coast—the Cairns and Gordonvale area—where there are no rural brigades. It has not had a huge impact. There has been the odd small rural brigade which has been a primary producer type brigade which may have folded as a result of urban development. They bought their farm and it has been developed. There has been the odd one of them. There has not been a real big impact.

If you go up onto the Tablelands around Mareeba and Atherton, you find the same thing. There is not a major impact. The urban fire districts on the Tablelands are very big and take in lots of rural area. Even though development is happening on the fringes of Mareeba or Atherton—those sorts of towns—it is already within the urban district so we have not had to expand the boundary. In fact, some years ago we reduced our boundaries slightly on the Tablelands to more reflect the urban environment. Some of the country went back into rural brigades.

Ms FARMER: So you have naturally taken care of that?

Assistant Commissioner Weston: We review it every year. We are looking at the boundary issues right now—that is, where our rural and urban brigades meet for any development or any areas that need to be changed.

Ms FARMER: How do you actually undertake that review? Do you communicate individually with those brigades?

Assistant Commissioner Weston: Yes, through the inspectors for the areas. That is the urban and rural inspector concerned. They will sit down and look at their areas and communicate that with their urban and rural brigades. That comes back to me for endorsement and then onto the commissioner for the process to continue. It takes about eight months to work right through the process before we get to a point where it is officially endorsed by the commissioner and the change happens. That is why we start now. Our aim is to start now for 1 July next year.

The only other area where we have recently had a bit of a change is around Innisfail. The Innisfail urban district was a lot of little islands. In other words, we had the Innisfail town then South Johnstone and the other little towns. There was lots of country that was cane country that had primary producer type Cairns

brigades. We had a meeting with them and they wanted to amalgamate into the urban district. They felt it was a better service delivery. That has only just happened this year. In July this year that changed. The rural brigades were involved in all the consultation. The council and all the stakeholders were involved. That was agreed to. It made a better model for everybody.

Mrs SMITH: My question is to Community Safety. Are fire wardens volunteer positions or are they employed by the department?

Supt Stafford: Fire wardens are volunteer positions.

Mrs SMITH: One of the suggestions that the committee received was that fire wardens be able to identify hazards and commence action to eliminate them. Is that a role of the fire wardens? If not, what do you see their role as being?

Supt Stafford: Fire wardens can offer advice to the community in how to manage their risks. There is no problem with that. It is the individual's responsibility at the end of day to manage that risk; hence the permit system. Whilst they may come to the fire warden or any other firefighting entity in the state for some advice in managing their risk, the permit process is in place so that when they want to manage the risk through that process the fire service has set down somewhat of a criteria to undertake the management of that risk. The fire warden will act in an advisory role.

There exists in legislation an opportunity for authorised fire officers, through delegation from the commissioner, to issue notices to reduce risk. We do have the power to do that. From time to time that is exercised, but not a lot in the rural context. It is probably more utilised in recent times in an urban context in relation to building fire safety matters.

Mrs SMITH: To Brett or Rob, what does the department see as the role of fire wardens in the local area?

Mr Stallbaum: Rural fire wardens?

Mrs SMITH: Yes.

Mr Stallbaum: I would ask Rob to provide comment on that.

Mr Miller: There are some DERM employees who are actually fire wardens. I am not sure whether that is because the role has traditionally always been with that position or what the case may be. Sometimes the fire warden is seemingly active in the Rural Fire Service and sometimes not. The only time we have a role with them is if and when we are negotiating a fire or communicating about special events or anything like that.

Mr RICKUSS: Do you find it works better if they are involved?

Mr Miller: Very much so.

Mr RICKUSS: I know that in my area it does seem to work best when the warden is a bit involved. Sometimes they are just older gentlemen who have been in the rural fires and got out because of their age. They are still available most weekends to write out permits and things like that.

Mr Miller: The fire wardens who are active on the ground are the ones that are really humming along.

CHAIR: The *Courier-Mail* reported on Wednesday, 18 August that there are new fire laws which mean that all fires will require permits. It says that permits will be required for all fires lit in Queensland under a fire danger period to be introduced from the end of this month. It says that for the first time the Queensland government will declare the new danger period, 29 August to 2 January. All fires in Queensland will need a permit. There are only very small exemptions for cooking fires in a properly prepared fireplace and some exemptions for primary producers such as cane growers. Other than that, even if people want to burn some rubbish around their property they will need to get a permit. Everybody is aware of those things? That is going to put some pressure on the fire wardens because there will hopefully be a lot more people coming to them to get a permit. Do you see that as a problem?

Supt Stafford: That is a perception, with respect, Mr Chair. The current laws that exist outside the fire danger period, which is a new process for Queensland during the fire season, is that people could light fires without a permit but only to two metres in any one direction dependent on local by-laws in relation to nuisance issues and clean air and the like. A number of councils, as you would be aware, have by-laws to prevent any burning within their area. Our belief is that it will not put a great impost on fire wardens in relation to people getting permits. Those people who manage their property in that way would have already done so prior to the season starting—that is, before 29 August.

CHAIR: Maybe I am missing something there. Are you saying that you are still allowed to have fires which are two metres square?

Supt Stafford: No, you are not allowed to have the two-metre fire.

CHAIR: The backyard fire. You are not allowed to do that anymore, as from 29 August?

Supt Stafford: But you could not do that in most local authorities due to by-laws that existed.

CHAIR: That is what I understood it to be.

Supt Stafford: The cooking related issue is obviously for camping and the like and other cultural things like hangis et cetera.

Mr RICKUSS: Bob Katter was on TV telling us he could not light a fire.

Supt Stafford: No comment.

CHAIR: Brett and Rob, do you think that is a good idea, coming up to a bad fire season?

Mr Stallbaum: It is a regulation that we will be not administering or will not have to manage. I was chatting to Rob about that—as long as there is clarity and we are not trying to manage people who require fire permits when they go camping on national parks. I believe that has been exempted, so it is fine.

Mr RICKUSS: Just one supplementary to that: do you have many fires lit in your parks?

Mr Stallbaum: Arson fires?

Mr RICKUSS: Yes.

Mr Stallbaum: Yes, we do. That is the lion's share of our fire work. It overtakes our planned burns during some times of the year. An example I could cite is the Gillies Range that leads from Gordonvale up to the Atherton Tablelands. Last year there were 11 spot fires on one day. That requires not only Parks resources but also whatever we can get up there. It is just not a good outcome for any range of reasons when we are not planning to burn there. Yes, we have do have a big problem with unlawfully lit fires.

Mr RICKUSS: What about in you area, Les? Are most of your fires from blokes burning off and they get away from them or are they from something else?

Mr Edmestone: I do not really know how they happen. Whether they are from cigarettes or someone lighting up a bit of rubbish on their block and it gets away, I do not know. Normally we are just there to help put it out.

Supt Stafford: Just in relation to the issue of a fire being two metres in any direction, one of the motivators for the fire danger period and stopping those fires is fires getting away. We identified that a number of fires had happened due to people's carelessness in relation to those small fires causing larger fires and then obviously putting an impost on the organisation's resources to manage.

Mr CRANDON: The Auditor-General's report talked about some pressures around volunteerism, the numbers of volunteers and so forth. Does the Department of Community Safety get involved in any way in recruitment drives and so forth?

Supt Stafford: Certainly. There was some mention in the submission about the support rural operations provide to brigades in relation to assisting with issues about volunteerism. I think there is an understanding. We certainly do understand that there is a growing challenge, if you like, in relation to volunteerism. Obviously it is not just with rural fires brigades but also with the SES and other volunteer organisations. We are aware of that. There are promotions, if you like, in relation to recruiting volunteers.

Mr CRANDON: How successful are they? Can you give some feedback on how successful they are?

Supt Stafford: I could not give you exact numbers right now.

Assistant Commissioner Weston: It is hard to gauge.

Mr CRANDON: Broadly speaking, are you getting some success? Little success?

Assistant Commissioner Weston: It probably depends on what events are going on around the place at the time. If you go back to last year after the Victorian fires, there was probably a heightened sense. So at that time we probably engaged more people, because what went on down in Victoria was on everybody's mind and whether that could happen up here. So in situations like that you tend to get more people coming forward. But over time as that memory dims, the number lessens. In the rural world it depends on the population—people having to move away for employment and all sorts of other things that go on.

We have exactly this problem with our auxiliary brigades, too. Recruiting is always an ongoing issue. To support the rural brigades, we have an officer in Cairns who can provide press and all sorts of other types of mechanisms. We attend a lot of community forums where we are constantly advertising availability of volunteer or auxiliary type positions in communities and looking for members, as well as permanent employment in the department.

Mr CRANDON: Do you keep any records of the details of the volunteers that you have—their age, sex et cetera? Do you have a record of who is who in the rural fire brigades?

Supt Stafford: Yes, we do. Just recently—I could not put a date on it—there was a review of the records to ensure that the records were more accurate than they might have been. The exact process I could not outline for you at this point in time. My understanding is that there are records maintained so that we know who are active firefighters, who are trained firefighters, who do administrative roles and the like.

Mr CRANDON: Do you use those records at all to determine any mitigating issues such as an ageing volunteer force—that type of thing? Do you do anything there? Are you looking at it and actively using those records?

Supt Stafford: I mentioned earlier about the inspectors having a really good relationship with the rural fire brigades. A lot of that will be picked up there. Given my acting role and being only four weeks in, I do not want to mislead you at all. I could not answer your question specifically about the use of records in Cairns

that matter, but I can say that, through the relationships the inspectors and the area training officers have with brigades, they know people out there. So they get a handle on the demographic of their brigades, if you like, from that aspect.

Mr CRANDON: Are they likely to report back and say, 'We have an issue over here. We have some weaknesses here and there'?

Supt Stafford: Yes. They have talked to me in my role in the last four weeks or so on a couple of occasions in relation to the issue of volunteerism. As I alluded to before, we are critically aware that there is a potential problem there. I think it is fair to say that some of the brigades out there have family involvement, too. You might have cousins, uncles, brothers, sisters and the like within that brigade. As the demographic changes, it is the families that are changing within that. Different people take on different roles to maintain that brigade activity.

Mr CRANDON: Are there any strategies the department has put in place to reduce the pressure on volunteers?

Assistant Commissioner Weston: We are always trying to put the responsibility for fire in the rural sense where it belongs. There is a saying that he who owns the fuel owns the fire. So it is the responsibility of the landholder. Our target is community education and trying to ensure that landholders et cetera understand their responsibilities and do the right thing with fire. If we can achieve that then we should not be getting the pressure on our volunteers to have to go and combat fire. That is the ultimate goal, I suppose. We are still going to get accidents that happen. It is all about educating our communities and making sure that they are fire safe, fire ready and fire wise.

Mr CRANDON: I suppose that is a strategy you are employing.

Assistant Commissioner Weston: Yes. In turn, that will reduce the pressure on the volunteers. We do not want them being called out to these incidents. But, being human beings, we are going to have those sorts of fires. I do not think we will ever get to zero. It would be nice to think we would. I think we are always going to have fires. We do everything we can within the organisation to reduce the administrative burden on our volunteers as well by making it as simple as possible for them to do whatever administrative tasks are needed. That is where the inspectors, brigade training and support officers are vital in doing a lot of that work and reducing the load on the volunteer system.

Supt Stafford: I think it is worthy to note and put on the record that we have the greatest respect for the volunteer rural firefighters out there. We do concern ourselves with those pressures that may come to bear on them from time to time and we do try to assist through the management process in alleviating some of that pressure. They are very valued members of not only the community but certainly our organisation in what they do and what they achieve. So we are committed to supporting our volunteer rural firefighters.

CHAIR: We were talking earlier about subsidised equipment. I know that I have about 10 rural brigades in my electorate and there are some lists in relation to what is subsidised and what is not. Does the department have any input into what items are included on these lists, taking into account particular unique locations and local factors? For instance, is there a different list of subsidised equipment up here from what there is in South-East Queensland?

Mr RICKUSS: Is there a different list for the escarpment of the Atherton Tableland and for the flat country?

Supt Stafford: My understanding is that there is not. There is a state standardised equipment list that exists. There is an officer who manages the equipment appliance process—Inspector Rob Walker down in Kedron, I believe. I think there probably was a variety of equipment that existed out there. But, as would be appreciated as an organisation, we obviously have responsibility under workplace health and safety to ensure that we have an understanding of what is out there so that the correct training can be provided and so that that risk management process can be managed in relation to our people utilising that equipment. The standard list exists in relation to equipment and appliances.

Mr CRANDON: Just on that, isn't it possible for rural fire brigades to apply to use proceeds to upgrade a particular piece of equipment, if you like, to a bigger piece of equipment and just receive the subsidy for the value of that equipment on the list? So that indicates that it is not a fixed list. It might be a standard list but it is not a fixed list.

Supt Stafford: Thank you for pointing that out. A standard list is what I was referring to. A standard list of equipment is supplied across-the-board within the state. Different risks or shifting risks might dictate a move in the type of appliance or particular equipment list for that brigade. Certainly that can be changed, but it is selected from a central list.

Mr RICKUSS: The issue of funding of rural fire services was a major cause of angst among many of the rural fire brigades that provided submissions. How does the funding work in the local area? Are many local rural fires supported by the councils? In Etheridge they were not.

Supt Stafford: It is up to the brigades to organise and manage the arrangements with local governments in relation to in-kind support or a rural fire levy. Some brigades choose not to organise a rural fire levy, and there might be a variety of reasons for that.

CHAIR: When you say that some brigades choose not to, are you saying that they choose not to approach their councils?

Supt Stafford: It is up to the brigades to make the determination of whether or not they seek support from the council to strike a rural fire levy.

Mr RICKUSS: Would you like to see that modified so that every brigade did that? Do you have a preference from a personal point of view? Do you feel it is inequitable the way it is?

Supt Stafford: With respect, I do not feel it is appropriate to portray my personal views on the issue given that I am representing the organisation. Suffice it to say, there are opportunities there. I suppose that would be a fair enough answer. If the brigade, through their management processes, identifies that they would like to get a levy struck, then approaches can be made to the council to get that done. That is done as a community process, as you are probably aware. So the community has some input in relation to what that levy might be. But it is predominantly for consumable items to ensure that the brigade runs effectively.

Mr RICKUSS: What about you, Wayne? Are you quite happy? Do you think it would be easier as a blanket process across the state or is it working quite well the way it is?

Assistant Commissioner Weston: I feel the same as Adrian. I have a personal view, but I am here to represent the commissioner. I just checked my notes and there are only four councils within this area that are actually collecting a levy.

CHAIR: Out of how many would that be?

Assistant Commissioner Weston: If you take in all the Aboriginal communities as well, we have about 34 or 35. Those four councils are the ones here on the coast—Cassowary, Cairns, Tablelands and Cook. It does go right to the top of the cape.

CHAIR: Four out of 35.

Assistant Commissioner Weston: Roughly. I cannot be exactly sure of those figures.

CHAIR: That gives us some idea.

Assistant Commissioner Weston: Predominantly all of those Aboriginal communities are funded by different means and in different ways. They get funding for a lot of other things. Amongst those four councils, I could not tell you how many brigades are accessing that. As Adrian said, that is brigade choice. I know there are some who choose to ask the council to collect it and others who run their own levy scheme within their own brigade district. It is their choice as to how they do that.

Ms O'NEILL: My question is to the Department of Community Safety. Are any departmental officers involved in the training of rural fire brigades locally? If so, does that include practical training?

Supt Stafford: Yes, certainly there is. Within the rural operations structure there exists area training support officers and also brigade training officers. So they do provide training to the rural fire brigades. What was the second part of your question?

Ms O'NEILL: Is it theoretically or practically based?

Supt Stafford: There is a dual approach, if you like. There is theory based stuff that is delivered out there but there are also practical elements to it. Some of those examples would be, as Brett alluded to before, in relation to organised exercises. For example, we have multiagency exercises where we do hazard reduction burns. That is real-life practical training, if you like, aside from fires. Certainly there are practical components and theory.

Ms O'NEILL: Is there a good take-up? Do most volunteers attend?

Supt Stafford: I could not say. We have a new learning development program which assists in training rural firefighters and volunteers. There is also access to e-learning processes that they can access through electronic means.

Mr RICKUSS: Is there any grandfathering? If a bloke has just retired from the Air Force and he was involved with firefighting at Amberley for 10 years, can he grandfather that experience and get signed off? Or if someone has had 10 years experience in the rule fires and had a few years break, can they come back in?

Supt Stafford: Certainly. Recognition of prior learning exists throughout the organisation. Given today's issues around training organisation status and the like, it has to be a formalised process. But there is a process there that people can get their prior skills recognised and gain the qualifications through the organisation.

Mr RICKUSS: I know some blokes who are great bushmen but are virtually illiterate. Is there a process that assists them?

Supt Stafford: Wayne might want to answer that.

Assistant Commissioner Weston: Our training is competency based. That means that for those who might have trouble with reading and writing it can be based on the practical. If they cannot sit down and do a written theory exam, it can be done via a verbal method. So we try to cater for every person within the system. You are dead right: a lot of people are very good volunteers but cannot do the written theory side of it. But we do cater for that. It is a flexible system.

Mr RICKUSS: That is good.

Assistant Commissioner Weston: In relation to volunteer training, there are a lot of officers on the urban side who also go into rural communities and provide training to the volunteers. We have a permanent zone officer. That is one of his key roles. He is a station officer in the system. One of his key roles is to work with the rural brigades/interface brigades and provide training and support. As well, a lot of our community safety people—that is a section within QFRS—are quite often in rural communities. Whenever we are in those communities we endeavour to do some sort of training or education in those communities, whether it be with the volunteers or the community. Generally you will find that if we are training community members most of them are volunteers in those small communities.

Ms O'NEILL: It has been raised in some of the submissions that the administrative tasks are not always greeted with the importance—as an ex-trade union official who represented admin workers—that should be applied to them. Do you have training for people to complete admin tasks or do they just have to figure them out?

Assistant Commissioner Weston: Yes, we do. There are courses and that type of activity available. I cannot speak 100 per cent for the volunteer system—predominantly each brigade has a secretary—and what training is made available to them. I am sure that the inspectors and the area training and support officers would be providing that training. It might be just a one-on-one thing where they go to the person's house, have a cup of coffee and do a bit on the computer to help them in that sense. I could not comment on more formal training for the administrative side of it.

Ms O'NEILL: I think you said that sometimes they provide support for them. When you notice that they are having difficulty, would you say, 'We need someone to give them a hand to do the admin tasks,' or even to help them understand that there are admin tasks? I know that it was referred to before that you cannot get the resources you need if you do not keep the records.

Assistant Commissioner Weston: Yes. If a rural brigade asks for support in any way, the inspectors would make arrangements to do that.

CHAIR: Could I pick up on that point? You just talked about training, and traditionally there have been different ways of doing that. We are moving into the e-commerce world. Have you adopted any e-commerce technologies, whether it be on the web or via the internet? Have you done any of that?

Assistant Commissioner Weston: Definitely. The organisation has moved down the e-learning path in a significant way. There is quite a lot of that available to the volunteer network. Some of it might go out on a CD so they can sit at home and do self-paced study or they can log on to the volunteer portal or do training through the portal—through the DES portal, which is the department's portal. There are training activities based there. There is a whole range of different delivery modes. The old-fashioned way is still relevant whereby you get everyone in a room and deliver training to a whole heap of people. That is still quite relevant and we do a lot of that. But e-learning is a big thing. I think that will continue to develop. I think that is one of the more efficient ways of delivering training.

CHAIR: Self-paced and done at home, as you say.

Assistant Commissioner Weston: Yes, from home.

Ms FARMER: My question is to DERM. There are obviously a lot of threats facing World Heritage areas and fire would be one of them. Do the rural fire brigades play any role in mitigating those risks?

Mr Stallbaum: Yes, they do. If we have planned burns within the World Heritage area, within our Wet Tropics region, and they want to become involved or we identify a need for them to become involved, then they will become involved at that planning stage. Operationally, when we go out and do that planned burn we do that as well. Also, when we are fighting wildfires—whether they are unlawfully lit or lit through weather strikes—to put it quite simply it is a case of all hands on deck when we are up here. It is just a case of getting whatever resources you can from wherever. So if a fire commences in a protected area of the state, such as the Wet Tropics World Heritage area, and it looks like moving into an area tenure that other agencies are responsible for, we will get them involved on an as-needs basis.

Ms FARMER: Literally, with your planned burns, you will be talking to anyone who could possibly be involved anyway. So they are going to know ahead of time and they may or may not want to be involved. They can choose.

Mr Stallbaum: Yes.

Ms FARMER: Do the fire wardens have a role in that process?

Mr Miller: In the planning stages, yes, they normally do. That is usually identified through the fire management committees post, during and prior to fire season. Yes, they do.

Supt Stafford: In relation to planning, there is a multiple level approach. There are regional interdepartmental committees that meet, predominantly from our point of view around fire. Also, subcommittees are formed out of that to address some of the planning issues and mitigation issues. Then you have the other end of the scale where locally members of the rural fire brigades themselves recognise risks that exist within their communities.

Ms FARMER: So they might be telling you first because they know their area.

Supt Stafford: They may well organise a hazard reduction burn with other agencies at a local level and then feed that information up. There is a two-way approach to it, if you like.

Assistant Commissioner Weston: The relationship in the Far North with Parks and Wildlife, DERM and Forestry et cetera is excellent. The rural brigades work very well and closely in all areas. We do use a lot of the control burns that Parks and others do as exercises, which tests everybody's systems. The volunteers get involved in that, as well as the permanent staff from our organisation, our Parks counterparts and many others. They are excellent ways of testing our systems, learning and being ready for the coming season. We are doing some of those as we speak.

Ms FARMER: Going back to the point that you made, Brett, about the rural fire brigades having the option of being involved in the planned burns, do many of them decline that offer?

Mr Stallbaum: No, typically not. They are generally pretty keen. If they want to become involved at the planning stage, we welcome that. There may be some disagreement with the philosophy of the burn at a given time and that will be a point of discussion. But if we have identified a planned burn and we have identified it for the reasons that we have, we involve them in the planning process. Then there are varying degrees, as with individuals, as to whether they agree with our philosophy and whether they will choose to get involved or not. It may come down to that sometimes.

If I could just answer a question that the member for Lockyer asked in regard to the training, I myself took part just recently in fire level 1 training—the entry level. The skill set that you want at the end of the day is to be able to pick up a hose, start a pump and do it. The instructor who delivered that made it very clear that it did not matter how well you wrote the answers—literacy was not a pass or fail—and if he needed to he would sit down with the participants and talk them through to make sure they understood what was being asked. So if they had a bushman's skill and they could articulate it by doing it, that is what they did.

CHAIR: This was a rural fire instructor?

Mr Stallbaum: This was an instructor who delivers level 1 training. So he delivers that training to anyone who wants that skill.

CHAIR: That is good to hear.

Mr RICKUSS: That is what you want, of course.

Mr Stallbaum: Absolutely.

Mrs SMITH: I have another question to the Department of Community Safety. What processes does the department have to educate landowners and the public at large about fire?

Supt Stafford: There are a number of processes. Notices are issued by the commissioner. An example just recently is the fire danger period. Media outlets are notified so that they can widely communicate to the community in relation to any particular issues that might come about. There is a two-pronged approach, if you like—one within the emergency environment and one outside the emergency environment. There is obviously electronic media—websites and the like. Wayne alluded to one of our urban staff members whom we utilise as well. She is the community liaison officer predominantly in an urban role. She does a lot of that type of media role, communicating in that way. Rural do get support from the community liaison officer.

Within the emergency environment, there are a couple of systems that have been put in place in relation to texting people about the danger that exists where they live so that they can be prepared or in fact leave the area. There is normal media as well in relation to that. There is the news system. I think that is part of the texting. There is a variety of ways we communicate. Certainly word of mouth—people talking to people—is probably as effective as anything else. Certainly all staff are educated about the changes that occur within the organisation so they can then pass that on to others when they are asked about things.

Assistant Commissioner Weston: We engage with some of the landholder organisations, such as AgForce and Canegrowers—those sorts of agencies—which have got the people as part of their business, I suppose. That is where we can get a lot of our messages out. The other important one in the rural parts of the world are the field days and farm machinery days. We always make sure that we have a presence, both rural and urban, and we do lots of demonstrations and displays. It is surprising the number of people who come and ask questions on those days. We can educate them about simple things like smoke alarms in homes. Even though you might live in the Etheridge shire with Les, you are still required to have them but there are people who do not know and do not know what to do with them. They are a big way of educating our community.

Supt Stafford: There is an example of that happening today at Cooktown. There are urban and rural firefighters, both staff and volunteers, undertaking that very thing today in Cooktown. Resources have been sent from Cairns to support that activity up there, both rural and urban resources. Yes, that is an example that it is actually happening.

CHAIR: Are there any further comments you would like to make before we close today? Are you happy to leave it at that?

Mr Stallbaum: No, thank you.

Assistant Commissioner Weston: No, thank you for the opportunity.

CHAIR: The time allotted for this session has expired. However, if any members here have any further questions, we will write to you. Otherwise, thank you for your attendance today. Certainly the committee appreciates your assistance during the day. We will now take a short break and resume at 3.45 pm. You are welcome to stay as observers for the next session if you wish.

Proceedings suspended from 3.30 pm to 3.45 pm

HADLEY, Mr Mark, Second Officer, Julatten Rural Fire Brigade

ROSSI, Mr Paul, First Officer, Behana Gorge and Quingilli Rural Fire Brigade

SAUSMAN, Dr Michael, Fifth Officer, Julatten Rural Fire Brigade

THOMSON, Mr John, RFBAQ Representative, Clohesy Group Officer, Speewah Fire Warden, Rural Fire Brigades Association of Queensland

WIENERT, Mr Graham, Director, Canegrowers, Cairns Region

CHAIR: Good afternoon, ladies and gentleman. I declare this session of the Public Accounts and Public Works Committee's inquiry into the management of rural fire services in Queensland now open. I am Wayne Wendt, the chair of the committee. The other members of the committee here today are: Ian Rickuss MP, the deputy chair and member for Lockyer; Michael Crandon MP, the member for Coomera; Di Farmer, the member for Bulimba; Mary-Anne O'Neill MP, the member for Kallangur; and Christine Smith MP, the member for Burleigh. We also have with us Deb Jeffrey, the research director, and two members of our Hansard team.

This hearing is a formal proceeding of the parliament and is subject to the Legislative Assembly's standing rules and orders. The committee will not require witnesses to give evidence under oath, but I remind you that intentionally misleading the committee is a serious offence. Thank you for your attendance here today.

Could witnesses please be mindful that when they wish to make a statement they speak into the microphone. Could I also request that mobile phones be turned off. If anyone needs to take a call, could they take it outside the room. You have previously been provided with a copy of the instructions for witnesses, so we will take those as read. Hansard will record the proceedings and you will be provided with the transcript.

We are running this hearing as a round table format to facilitate discussion. However, for reasons of privilege, only members of the committee can put questions to witnesses. If you wish to raise issues for discussion, I want to stress that you must direct your comments through me as the chair.

I also remind all those participating in the hearing today that these proceedings are similar to parliament to the extent that the public cannot participate in the proceedings. In this regard, I remind members of the public that under the standing orders the public may be admitted to or excluded from the hearing at the discretion of the committee.

Before we start, I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your submissions in response to the committee's discussion paper, and we will examine some of the issues raised during the course of this hearing. The local media, Channel 7, is here. He is going to be taking some footage. He will be leaving very shortly. I ask the member for Lockyer, Mr Ian Rickuss, to start questions.

Mr RICKUSS: I welcome everybody. It is good to see such a big group in the audience. It is good to see that the rural fires in the area are well represented. My first question is to the Quingilli and Behana Gorge rural fire brigades. You advise in your submission that the brigades do not have a revenue stream and all equipment is paid for by individual members. Are you satisfied with these arrangements?

Mr Rossi: Yes, in relation to the way we are run. We are obviously a decentralised brigade. We have individual farmer/grower members with their own units all over the district. They service us fine. There is a contribution from the member and there is also a contribution from the Rural Fire Service in purchasing that equipment. The way it is now works. It has worked in the past.

Mr RICKUSS: Do the members of fire brigade pay a fire levy to the council? Is there a levy on the rates notice?

Mr Rossi: No.

Mr RICKUSS: Do you get fairly good support from the landholders in the area when you have functions or raffles?

Mr Rossi: We are not that active in that respect. Basically, when there is a fire we turn up and deal with it. That is the way our fire brigade runs. We do what we have to do. We do training and those types of things with members. The members are pretty active in the role of firefighting. That is the way it works because we are all busy people.

Mr RICKUSS: So, really, you are quite happy with the funding arrangements as they are?

Mr Rossi: If it continues that way. In relation to equipment, we are a bit concerned about the allocation of resources and what is being offered by the service.

Mr RICKUSS: What do you mainly have? Do you have slip-on units for your utes?

Mr Rossi: Most of our firefighting equipment is tractors with a 3,000-litre tank. From what I can see, there seems to be a push away from that towards the yellow trucks, which are totally unusable in most of our situations. Hose reels and things like that seem to have been taken off the subsidised list. There are a lot of brigades in our situation. Cane trash is one of the main fire hazards. That is not going to reduce no matter what we do. Any other equipment is not useful to us. We would like to see the equipment list as it was.

Mr RICKUSS: So you feel that the changes to the equipment list are going to start to disadvantage you?

Mr Rossi: Very much so. People will not go for what is being offered there. Poly tanks are crazy when you are running around near a trash fire. They are not going to work. With smaller tanks you do not have the capacity. We need 3,000 litres to deal with these situations.

Mr RICKUSS: Are you just running with boom on the tank?

Mr Rossi: Firefighting hoses, in conjunction with the other equipment such as spinner rakes.

CHAIR: Can I comment on that, Paul. Earlier we heard from firefighters from the QFRS. We talked about the standard list of equipment provided. So you are suggesting that it is not up to standard in some respects because of your specific situations?

Mr Rossi: Yes, for our brigade. You can be 100 kilometres the other way and they want something different. In the cane trash residue areas we need to maintain the equipment that we have used in the past. That is what the members feel has been of best use to them.

CHAIR: So we do have poly tanks on the list but we do not have—

Mr Rossi: The galvanised 3,000-litre tanks. They are the robust ones and the ones that members prefer. You mount the reels on the tank. With the poly ones, you would have to build something different. Sometimes you are going into situations where you have fire underneath you or moving around you. I am not going to run around with plastic tanks.

Mr RICKUSS: Graham, would most of the cane growers feel the same?

Mr Wienert: Absolutely. The tank issue is a very big one. You need a far bit of water to deal with trash fires and mill mud fires. The 1,000-litre poly tanks would not do it. With the push-on units you are not going to get into a trash blanket fire. The 3,000-litre tanks are seen as essential to the members in those areas.

Mr CRANDON: We talked to the fires earlier about the fact that there is the standard list, as the chairman mentioned, but if you need to move away from the standard list the funding that would be available for things on the standard list is passed on to the other equipment that you might choose to have. Is that something that is available to you?

Mr Wienert: Certainly as far as I am aware, anyone chasing a 3,000-litre tank has difficulty getting them. Certainly the advice we have had is that you have to get quotes for it and submit them. It tends to become a very protracted process. When you are talking about volunteers, that is fairly unacceptable.

One of the main pieces of feedback we are getting at Canegrowers from a lot of the volunteers is, 'We are volunteering to this service. We go out and fight fires as a service to the community and we find ourselves getting mucked around by the process and have difficulty getting equipment and that sort of thing.' It is becoming a bit of a bugbear with a lot of the volunteers. The process needs to be simple. If you have to go looking for someone who can fabricate a tank for you and get a quote from them, it may not meet the specifications that are required by the Rural Fire Service so you have to go through the process again. It is a real problem.

Mr CRANDON: It all gets too hard?

Mr Wienert: If you have people doing it purely on a volunteer basis, they are going to give up on that fairly quickly and not worry about it.

Mr Thomson: Those tanks were available on the list a few years ago and have been for 10 or 15 years prior to that. Cane growers all the way from the far south up to Mossman are wondering why they were taken off because they used them all the time. It was their main structure on an old bin trailer to cart water for these types of fires.

CHAIR: I have the Quingilli submission here and I have just been reading that. Point taken.

Ms O'NEILL: Welcome, everybody. It is good to have an audience. My question is to the Julatten Rural Fire Brigade. Are you satisfied with the funding arrangements for your rural fire brigade?

Mr Sausman: We are funded by a local council levy. That works very well for us. Our only comment is that it should be per plot. If somebody has a series of plots joined together they pay only one levy. There are not very many, but there are a few who are escaping paying the full levy that they should be. It works extremely well for us.

Ms O'NEILL: You advise in your submission that your brigade receives funding from the local government levy but you know of others that do not. Can you expand on that?

Mr Sausman: Such as those I mentioned. We are aware of some who do not pay. I do not know exactly what you are looking to do, but if you are looking at whether there is a funding model that works then I point out that, for us, it works extremely well doing that. If there was a council levy for those guys, I guess it would mean that they would not be putting their hands in their pockets. It seems crazy to me that cane farmers should have to put their hands in their pockets to do that. The question for you guys is where that money comes from. We see that the local council levy works well because it is local money. The council understands the different areas within the council area and so they tend to work very well with us.

Mr RICKUSS: So there is virtually no cane up in your area?

Mr Sausman: Yes, there is cane up in our area. We have had a few managed burn-offs of cane trash from my memory, but I have not been in the area very long, as you can tell from my accent. Mark may know more.

Mr Hadley: Most of the cane farmers do their own trash burning these days. There are more grass fires than anything for us. We have a few road accident call-outs. The levy is also good in that the rural fire brigade can apply for a loan through the shire you are in. It gives the brigade a lot of flexibility in getting things. It does work in that way, too.

Ms FARMER: My question is to Speewah Rural Fire Brigade. Mr Thomson, what role do the fire wardens play in your area?

Mr Thomson: It has been part of the rural fire system since 1946-47. The fire warden plays a part pre fire. In other words, we inspect the area, lay down what is required to be done to do the burn—whether it is for hazard reduction, rubbish or wind rows—then we issue the permit on the conditions that are written down. Providing the permit holder does the right thing by the permit, everything is fine.

It has been working well. I cannot see any reason to change the permit, but the QRFS seems to have other ideas about it. We had a conference in Cairns and another one in Mackay back in about 2006. About 24 wardens came into Cairns. We discussed it for a day and put some recommendations forward. None of those have been implemented. A lot of others have been implemented, but none of the ones that the wardens requested have been implemented.

Ms FARMER: What were they, for instance?

Mr Thomson: One was that we have more room to write a person's name. Another is that there is no provision to say that the person has actually got the permit unless you turn it over and ask them to sign it on the back. We wanted a line down the bottom that said 'I agree with the conditions of this permit that was issued on' and their signature and date. That would make it a legal document.

On my permits I cross out 'it is better to notify' and put 'you must' so that the people who get the permit must notify the first officer that they are going to light a fire and they must notify Firecom that they are going to light a fire. That saves a whole stack of call-outs that are not required. With mobile phones nowadays, you would be surprised how many 112 or 000 calls they get about smoke coming from somewhere. People are activated and then find there is a permit. With those things on there it has saved a whole heap of hassles and problems for brigades and wardens.

The *Cairns Post* today had a little article that said that people must have a permit to light all fires after 29 August. I only spotted it because I was reading the *Cairns Post*. Normally I do not even look at those things. The only reason I looked at it was that there was an election on Saturday. How is 'Average Joe' outside going to know that this is now law? What is going to happen to the fire wardens? Do we become policemen if they light fires without a permit? It may be that they have raked up the leaves under the mango tree and want to burn them. No thought has gone into it.

Ms FARMER: There are probably a couple of questions leading on from there. One of the things I wanted to ask you goes back to the role of the fire warden. One of the suggestions we have received is that fire wardens should be able to identify a hazard and actually start action to eliminate the hazard. What do you think about that?

Mr Thomson: It will work in my case because I am fire warden, I am the chairman and I am also the group officer of a group. I like to think that I have got my fingers on the pulse. But for somebody who is out in the bush further away, that may not be the case. I have only about 28 square kilometres. If somebody has 2,000 or 5,000 square kilometres, you are going to put a fair bit of weight on them to do some of these things.

CHAIR: It is a suggestion only.

Mr Thomson: It is suggestion only.

Ms FARMER: We have received a number of submissions from across the state and that is just one of the things that is coming up.

CHAIR: They are telling us that that is their view.

Ms FARMER: I would like to ask the other rural fire brigades their opinions of that. Did you want to add anything more to that?

Mr Thomson: No.

Ms FARMER: What about the others?

Mr Sausman: Our fire warden is an integral part of the fire brigade. It is as simple as that. We know every single permit that is written and we are informed. We often turn up for the bigger fires anyway, just in case. If it is a bigger fire, we actually do the back-burning anyway. The warden has to be an integral part of the brigade. Does that answer your question?

Ms FARMER: Yes. What about the additional role of identifying hazards?

CHAIR: Which takes it a step further.

Mr Sausman: It does. I think it puts a lot onto the fire warden. It puts too much onto them.

Mr Hadley: In the area of Julatten and Speewah, Speewah is dry. There is a bit of rainforest. We are green all the time. We get people coming to us asking, 'Why can't we light a fire? There is ban everywhere but we are green.' There is no reason they cannot light a fire, providing the fire warden has checked it out and they have played by the rules. That is one of the biggest problems we have in our area.

CHAIR: So you are saying that one rule does not fit everybody?

Mr Hadley: No.

CHAIR: The question that Di was particularly interested in was if a fire warden identifies an area that needs to be burned.

Mr Hadley: I still believe it is up to the local fire warden to use his own intuition for each situation. If you put it back on one person here in Cairns or wherever it may be, I think you are asking for a lot of trouble.

CHAIR: That is what we wanted to know.

Mr Rossi: The local custodians of the area are the best to manage the area. That happens now with our fire wardens and the national parks service. They manage hazardous areas that usually go up at the wrong time—December or something. We burn them off earlier. We have particular problem areas that we deal with every year pretty much to reduce that problem. Year in, year out they go will up if you deal with them in the low-risk areas.

Ms FARMER: You know your problems ahead of time?

Mr Rossi: Yes.

Mr Wienert: I would just add to something the gentlemen from Julatten said. In the Mulgrave Valley, within six kilometres you can have a dramatic difference in the terrain. You can be in rain on one side of the valley and it can be bone dry on the other. I emphasise the fact that one rule does not fit all. Putting a blanket fire ban on because it is dry in one spot is not appropriate to other areas. That is where the role of the fire warden really comes in. He knows the area, he knows the terrain and he knows what is going on. It is very important to have that local man on the ground for that sort of thing. As far as him identifying fuel reduction, our fire warden is very involved, too. If he sees anything he certainly brings it to our attention and tries to do something about it. It depends how far you want to take it. To make it his responsibility to identify all hazards in an area is putting an awfully big load on him.

Ms FARMER: What you all seem to be saying is that it probably happens a fair bit anyway but it is not necessarily the formal role?

Mr Wienert: That is right. I think it would be putting a very large load on them to make it formal. I think it is working very well the way it is at the moment.

Mr Thomson: We have a group in Mareeba and a group in Atherton, which is in the Tableland Regional Shire Council. They meet three, four or five times a year. Those involved are from Main Roads, railways, council, rural fires and Parks and Wildlife. We discuss where we are going to burn and why we need to burn. We start in March, when it is still raining, and we have our program set out. We try to adhere to that each year so that we end up not burning the same place every year. At this stage it is working extremely well. That has been done off the backs of the council and rural fire and the rest of the management group. It is working very well at this stage.

Mrs SMITH: Paul, we understand from your submission that you have a very close working relationship with your fire warden. Are you aware of other fire wardens and their relationship with their local rural fire brigades?

Mr Rossi: No, not particularly. I am only aware of my own. I pretty much work in my area and do not go outside it in the rural fire scope of things.

Mrs SMITH: Mike or Mark, would you like to comment on that?

Mr Sausman: I am not aware of any. I would have thought it was a prerequisite for the job to be in close contact and work very closely with the fire brigade. I would imagine that in some areas there would be one warden which covers more than one brigade. It must be a prerequisite to work together; otherwise it would not work.

Mrs SMITH: John, would you like to comment?

Mr Thomson: Years ago the fire warden was actually appointed. It was virtually an act of parliament. It does not happen that way now. They are voted by the brigades. The brigades actually vote for their fire warden. Once that person is appointed it is virtually a lifetime job, unless they foul up or Cairns

somebody has to reason to say that they are not doing their job correctly or they are too old to get around. It is job that the warden does freely. It is a job that the members of the brigade actually vote for. It is up to the brigade to make sure their fire warden is a good one.

I was a trainer with rural fires for seven years. I trained a lot of the fire wardens around here or spoke to them. Some of them were a damn sight older than I was and doing it for longer. It was not much use training them. They are doing an exceptional job.

Mr RICKUSS: Some of the older fire wardens have given up being involved in their rural fire brigades but are still the fire warden because they are home most weekends and they have the time to do that sort of stuff. That is where the difference comes at times. The brigade can start to move away from their mode of thinking at times because the world changes.

Mr CRANDON: I will ask all the groups, but I will start with the Julatten Rural Fire Brigade. What is the impact of urban encroachment on rural fire services in the local area?

Mr Sausman: If the area was just completely rural it would just be a case of cane farms and things like that. Julatten has definitely become more built up. The roads are busier so we are getting more traffic accidents. We are getting more instances—and we are not talking about huge numbers—where there are house fires or situations that we are not trained to deal with or to deal with properly.

The issue with that is that the SES, the ambulance and the real fire guys are somewhere between 20 and 40 minutes away, depending on what else they have got on at the time. I do not mean that nastily. Obviously they are busy and not just sitting around waiting for something to happen in Julatten. That means that we are called on more to deal with those things. That means that some of us attend more training. That means more time. It means we are giving up more of our time to do that.

You have to look at the amount of time we are all giving and the training that we have to do. We definitely have an issue with getting new, younger members in. None of us are spring chickens; we are all getting older. A lot of younger people move away. So even if they join, they would then move away and not come back until they are older or more settled. We do have an issue with recruiting new members and retaining new members. I think that is all part of it.

I am involved in more than one not-for-profit organisation. You always end up relying on a few people to do everything. You have to find a way of rewarding people. There is the attitude of 'what's in it for me?' at the end of the day. Everybody is busier and has commitment.

Mr CRANDON: The answer morphed into an area we will probably be dealing with shortly. Paul, did you want to talk about urban encroachment on the rural scene?

Mr Rossi: With more people moving into an area you are going to get more hazards. You get people selling off smaller blocks. So you get five-acre farmlets popping up in the middle of farming land. That is another potential source of ignition. Generally town people have little knowledge of the area or fires. There is the potential for a lot more hazards. We are bit further south of a lot of the subdivision going on, but we are in the area. There are more people. As a result, we are getting a few more spot fires and things like that which we deal with quickly.

Mr RICKUSS: Are you starting to get complaints from those in the urban encroachment areas about the cane fires?

Mr Rossi: Yes, that has always been there. Once the mill starts that pops up. We wait for it. As long as you have trash residue you will always have a fire risk, regardless of what you do. Whether it is from lightning, an accident or a managed burn, it goes up and quickly. You have to be able to deal with it.

Mr RICKUSS: You would grow too much trash up here not to burn.

Mr Wienert: It is a management tool to limit erosion. So far as burning standing cane, green harvest has been going for over 20 years up here. It has also been very much encouraged through all the reef protection legislation to limit any run-off out of the paddocks. It is good tool for keeping weeds down and things like that. It is not a matter of not having the time or resources to burn it off; it is just a good thing to keep in the paddock. Having it there is always going to present a fire risk. Usually we see it when there is a control burn somewhere. If embers get away and get into the trash blanket, it can get away from you. We are always fairly well manned on those sorts of burns and we get on it pretty quickly. You need to have the equipment there. You need to be able to get into the paddocks and to get at it.

Mr CRANDON: Graham, coming back to the question of urban encroachment, did you want to make any comment on that?

Mr Wienert: The one thing we thought of was could there be some sort of mail-out to the rural residential landholders and those sorts of people with a package explaining about the Rural Fire Service and what role they fill and that sort of thing. At the rate that a lot of these small hobby farm style blocks are popping up, the fire wardens and members of the brigades are not always aware of where these new developments are. So maybe there could be some sort of mail-out to explain to them some of the risks maybe of living in those rural areas and who to call. That might be a solution to some of the membership issues, too. People become aware of it.

CHAIR: Graham, are you suggesting a yearly mail-out by all rural fire brigades throughout Queensland? I am interested in hearing your views.

Mr Wienert: At the rate that the population is increasing up here, probably yearly would be a good thing. Maybe in other areas where the population is not increasing so quickly, it might not need to be that often.

Mr RICKUSS: It could probably be done by the local councils with their rate notices.

Mr Wienert: That would be perfect.

Mr RICKUSS: Most people are very annoyed when they get their rate notice, so they throw the rest of it in the bin.

Mr Wienert: We might be the good news in the package.

Mr Thomson: Yes, you hit the nail on the head. Our council will not put out anything in the rate notice for the rural fire brigade. As far as rural encroachment is concerned, if you have a look at page 6 of my submission and the section in red, that is my feelings on it. When I moved to Speewah, we had 295-acre blocks and about 10 of 500 acres or less. I think at the last count we had 427 blocks in our area. All of those other blocks have been five acres or less. So financially we are okay. But unfortunately most of those people who move into the area have not got a clue about fire, and it has been a long hard road to get them educated. We have got to the stage now where we go to more fires outside our area than we go inside. We only had three wildfires in our area last year. So we have got them educated, but it is extremely hard to do. I honestly feel that the council should take part in this and help brigades along for our benefit and their benefit. It is also for the benefit of the urban area, because if there is a house fire we cannot control it. It is the red truck that is going to get called to that. If there is no water because the power has gone out, that is the problem.

CHAIR: So you are supporting what Graham said.

Mr Thomson: Yes, definitely.

CHAIR: One of the submissions we received discussed the issue of compulsory training. One of the submissions actually said that if we were to instigate compulsory training there would be an immediate loss of between 25 and 50 per cent of our volunteers. I note that the Julatten submission said that a way to attract volunteers is to provide them with a tax credit or even something like \$100 off their car registration but only on the proviso that they have undergone crew leader training and above. So there are a couple of issues there I suppose. I will start with the Julatten Rural Fire Brigade. What do you think about compulsory training and do you think there it would have an adverse effect on your numbers?

Mr Sausman: I have run some very large companies, some small companies and done all kinds of stuff. I have recruited people and tried to keep people. In my view the carrot always works better than the stick. If you are going to go the compulsory training route, you are still going to have to reward people. If you say, 'Yes, you must do at least this amount of training every month,' you are going to have to reward them to do that. Otherwise, people will say, 'Why am I doing all of this?' Some people will always do it of course. I just believe that the carrot is much better. To say, 'If you do this amount of training, then we will reward you in some way,' to me that is a better way of approaching it.

Mr Hadley: I agree with that. You have to make it interesting. I know in Julatten that it is all right to turn up to do a bit of training but if it is not interesting or if there is not a barbecue at the back-up at the end of it, they are not going to come back. It is as simple as that. They just lose interest.

CHAIR: What about the issue of safety? There are some minimum requirements, you would expect.

Mr Hadley: We do all the safety that you are supposed to do. We teach everybody safety. That is one of the first things you teach. But you are a volunteer. How much do you have to do? I know that in our brigade you have to do FMS, crew leader courses and all this kind of stuff which is great—I love it and a lot of blokes do—but there are a lot of blokes saying, 'I'm a volunteer. Why do I have to do this? All I want is for you to call me when there is a fire and I'll come and help.' We have this little bit of conflict in that regard—not so much conflict but—

CHAIR: Understood.

Mr Rossi: You probably hit the nail on the head there. You will lose a percentage if it becomes compulsory in my brigade. Pretty much most of the members have done the minimum firefighter training. The new members who join—those aligned with the farmlets—they go off and they do the training anyway because they are new to the game. The older guys who have been dealing with fire for 40 or 50 years, their interest in doing something like that is minimal. They might be getting on a bit. They are just not going to do it.

CHAIR: So would the idea of a yearly subsidy in relation to their registration or something appeal to people or not?

Mr Rossi: No, I do not think so, not to those sorts of fellas. You can tell them the theory on things, but in dealing with the situation of fires there is not much you could tell them, to be honest, other than to wear their PPE, which they can be a bit stubborn with.

CHAIR: I will come back to you, Graham. I want to hear John's comments.

Mr Thomson: As an ex-trainer, I do not think it should be compulsory. They are volunteers. The training has to be attractive enough to attract them and be worthwhile. Going over the same thing again and again under a different name is not working. The other thing with volunteers is that the training has to be done on weekends or nights. There was a move to tell them when the training was on and they will

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either come or they won't. That does not work because people have to make a living. So they are at work or they are looking after their business. You cannot put training on in the middle of the day or on a Wednesday or a Thursday and expect people to give up their job to go to the training. So our trainers themselves are going to have to be working on weekends and take the weekdays off. It is one of the things that volunteers do. They train on the weekends and they train at night. They have not got the time to do it in the day.

CHAIR: How do we encourage them?

Mr Thomson: In my case it might work if you gave them \$100 off their registration because mine are mainly five-acre rural blocks where people are working during the week. For the cane farmers, no. I agree with Paul. It is not going to work. It is like fires: there are horses for courses. In some places it will work; other places it won't.

Mr Wienert: In relation to the training, I think one of the big things is relevance too, especially in our area. John is dead right: most of those sorts of inducements are not going to work in cane areas. You would rather be out working your paddock or something like that. So it is really about relevance. We have a lot of training sessions where they bring in one of the yellow tenders with foam and all the mod cons, whereas our main firefighting appliance is a galvanised tank behind a tractor. We need to have training courses tailored to the experience that you are going to have when you go out to fires. That is the big thing. Guys will give up a day when the sun is shining and they really want to be back on the farm but they come to training and think, 'What good is this to me?' Certainly in our area on cane farms I think making the training as short and sharp as possible and as relevant as possible is the way to go. If it only needs a day to do it, take a day and not two days and make it relevant.

Mr RICKUSS: Chair, I did notice that a lot of heads in the audience nodded when you said between 25 and 50 per cent would disappear from the volunteer brigades.

CHAIR: Do you have another question?

Mr RICKUSS: My question is to the Julatten Rural Fire Brigade. The Department of Community Safety's submission to the inquiry noted that there was a high level of cohesiveness between the permanent urbans and auxiliary urbans and the volunteer rural fire entities being developed. Do you agree with this?

Mr Sausman: Yes, we do work well together. We go down the hill to Port Douglas for road crash training.

Mr RICKUSS: What percentage of your work is involved in attending road crashes? Is it 30 or 40 per cent of your work? How often are you called out?

Mr Sausman: Not that many, but we are usually the first on the scene if something does happen because we are obviously local. How many do we get, Mark? Probably four or five a year. It is not a huge number. But if we are there and on the scene—

Mr Hadley: It is increasing.

Mr Sausman: It is increasing. There is no doubt about that.

Mr RICKUSS: You get on pretty well together with all groups.

Mr Sausman: Yes, I would say so.

Mr Hadley: There is this thing with the urbans and the rural fire brigade. I do not know what it is. I do not have a problem with it providing we can all work together. I think there are a lot of rurals that think that the urbans are coming in and trying to take over. Maybe in some cases they are; I do not know. I know in our case eventually we all have to work together somehow. I think we need to do a little bit more with the urbans and the rurals. Maybe we can all get together through some sort of campaign and work it out that way. If we do not, I think there is a bit of conflict that could happen eventually down the track with some of those issues.

Mr RICKUSS: What about Quingilli and Behana Gorge?

Mr Rossi: There is definitely something going on there at times when you turn up. I do not know what it is. Generally we work together. We get what needs to be done done, but it is a bit of them and us sometimes. Whether they think we are not as trained or we are seen as lower, I do not know. Occasionally there will be a structure that they have to look after in a wildfire and they go and do it. There is not a lot of interaction generally—enough to get the job done. I cannot explain it.

CHAIR: Paul, do you have a yellow truck available as well?

Mr Rossi: No.

CHAIR: Only slip-ons and so forth.

Mr Rossi: Yes.

CHAIR: Do you have an auxiliary station nearby?

Mr Rossi: We have Gordonvale township auxiliary.

CHAIR: So you are saying that has happened when you have been involved before.

Mr Rossi: Occasionally. There are not a lot but there are a few instances where we have met up. There is not a lot of love, I suppose. I can't feel the love, put it that way.

CHAIR: How would that be overcome?

Mr Rossi: I guess just breaking down those stereotypes, those barriers, if you can do that. I do not know.

Mr RICKUSS: What about you, John?

Mr Thomson: Yes, I have struck it. I have almost come to blows over it a couple of times but that was only with a couple of personnel. And I will state well and truly that it was only a couple of personnel. Most of the guys, or pretty well 99 per cent of the guys, in the red trucks will do the job that they are trained to do. They do it exceptionally well and I take my hat off to them. But a lot of them think that because we are in a yellow uniform we are Dad's Army and there does not seem to be the respect for the rural firefighters. It is bad because we are both doing exactly the same thing. We are trying to achieve the same thing. That has broken down a lot, I feel, in the last few years with the advent of the five-acre blocks and the breaking out of the rurals into the really rural areas. Mareeba and Kuranda in our area are only 25, 30 or 35 minutes away and so they get called out quite often if there is danger to a structure. They rock up and say, 'Where do you want us?' We say, 'Look after those houses,' and they go and do that. If we need water, they will give us water. There is no problem. Yes, we are working. But there is that bit of feeling there still that we are a mob of Dad's Army. We can live with it. We have for years, so it is not really a big problem.

CHAIR: Do you have any advice as to how best to overcome it?

Mr Thomson: Yes, talk to them. That is the only way we are going to get over it. We are going to have to sit down with them and talk to them.

CHAIR: Between yourselves you mean—that people sit down and talk together.

Mr Thomson: Yes.

CHAIR: I am a great believer in communication.

Mr Hadley: The urbans put on fire brigade games or championships or whatever they are called. Julatten has been involved in a few of them. I have to say that that is one of the best things you can ever do—for the rurals to interact with the urbans in those games. Not only that, by doing that it is good for training. Instead of having to sit in a classroom and listen, you can do the games and half your skills are already done. You should be able to be ticked off—'There's your training.' You are not going to get any better training than on the field together.

Mr RICKUSS: That is very sensible.

Ms O'NEILL: My question is for Graham. The committee received submissions from both Canegrowers Mulgrave and Canegrowers Babinda. In the Mulgrave submission it was suggested that there are some shortfalls with accountability mechanisms that could be overcome with a few improvements. Do you have any comment on that or wish to expand on that?

Mr Wienert: I am a new director at Canegrowers. I came in late in the piece. I am not quite sure what they were talking about. They have mentioned a few things to me. From my experience as a member of the rural brigade, I have not really come across any of that. What issues there are with accountability are more along the lines of permits and things like that. I think that is probably the main thing. Some cane growers will go through the process of getting a permit and others will say, 'I have a permit but I'll burn as and when I feel.' That is probably one of the main issues.

As mentioned earlier, that probably is a part of the urban-rural animosity when it comes to fires. People burning outside their permit guidelines is a big issue. If you stick to when you are supposed to be burning, it is not usually as much of a drama for the urban areas as it ends up being if you burn at the wrong time. That is probably one of the main issues in relation to what sort of real powers the warden has to deal with some of those issues. It is either do nothing or come in with the jackboots kind of thing. Is there a sliding scale of dealing with those sorts of issues?

Ms O'NEILL: Paul, do you want to make any comment?

Mr Rossi: Yes, you get the guys who do get the permits, as Graham said, or do not get the permits and burn. It is a problem at times. You can look over at one o'clock in the roaring heat of day and there is a fire going nuts. More often than not it works out—more often than not but not always. That sort of thing can be an issue.

Mr RICKUSS: What would you say that is from? Ignorance or is a case of 'I have to burn Friday because I have to go to a wedding on Saturday'?

Mr Rossi: It is all of those things.

Mr RICKUSS: I have been a farmer, so I know the story.

Mr Rossi: Some people want to run the farm the way want to run it and they do not want other people dictating when and how you do it. Sometimes the trash will only go up at that time of the day if the window has been reduced and the weather has been working against you. But those factors could be negotiated with the warden as well on the permit. If you do not go ahead and get a permit, you are not covering yourself and that person is leaving themselves open for whatever comes of it.

CHAIR: Is there any good reason for not having a permit?

Mr Rossi: No, not really.

CHAIR: Are we therefore a bit lax in how we monitor those permits? Should there be stricter—

Mr RICKUSS: They are volunteers.

CHAIR: No, I mean in relation to somebody who does burn without a permit. We were just saying that there is no reason why someone should not have a permit. People might say, 'Nothing is going to happen, so I won't worry about a permit.' Are there people like that?

Mr Rossi: I am not sure how many people are burning without permits now. This year is even better than previous years. So each year there are more and more permits. I am not aware of too many fires that are lit without permits. It is a bit of apathy sometimes. Like I said, the incidents are getting better and better with education. If you know the guy, you always say something to them. You say, 'Make sure you do this because of this and that.' Generally they will come around. They work out that the process is not that arduous and they can handle it.

CHAIR: Is that right, John? Do you think we are a bit lackadaisical about those who habitually do not get permits?

Mr Thomson: In my area they are not. If we see smoke and there is no permit, we will go and investigate. It has happened half a dozen times. I generally finish up by saying, 'You have seen me twice.' He says, 'But this is the first time,' and then I say, 'Yes, and it will be last time. So there's your first and your last.' I smile when I say it and so far it has worked. We have not had any problems with any of those people. They always come and get permits now. I do not know. We need to educate the new people in areas. But, as I said, we have been working for 21 years up there and it is working.

CHAIR: Di.

Ms FARMER: Paul, we were talking about training earlier, and you seem to all have pretty much the same views about that. Just to flesh that out a bit more, what training actually is available to the volunteers for your brigade?

Mr Rossi: The service does run weekend courses like John was talking about. Generally we will do them on a Saturday or a Sunday. So we have had fireman skills training. Then you also have the online modules. You might be aware that they have come on this year, that they are up and running.

Mr Thomson: Yes.

Ms FARMER: Yes.

Mr Rossi: It is up to the brigade to interact. If we want more, then we can go to the service and say, 'We need a course for this.' Generally I will get the numbers and sort that out.

Ms FARMER: Do the departmental officers get involved with the training?

Mr Rossi: It is in the Rural Fire Service. We will get a trainer out. The training officer, whoever it may be on the day, will run the course. That does not happen a lot. We have one or two a year. For our area that is pretty much on par for what we require anyway. Getting everyone to have the minimum skills is what we aim at. If people want to do further officer training and things like that, sure. Maybe they can go off and group with other groups in different areas to get the numbers.

Ms FARMER: For you, does the amount of training that you feel you are required to do and that you feel you need to do sit right?

Mr Rossi: On a voluntary basis, yes. Most of our brigade members are very experienced in fires. They are pretty much going through the motions to meet minimum skill requirements and things like that. A lot of them sit through the courses. They might pick a few things up. For them, there is not a lot in a lot of the courses. The ones I have done have not been particularly suitable for our area. But every area is different and it is a bit hard. I do not know if you can do much better.

Ms FARMER: But you feel that you can give a fair bit of feedback to the local departmental people about what you need and what is appropriate?

Mr Rossi: Yes.

Ms FARMER: What about Julatten?

Mr Sausman: We make sure that almost everybody has the basic skills training. I guess it is the same thing. We probably have one or two formal courses a year maximum. If there is something particular that we want, we can do it. Cairns tend to arrange things for us, Molloy and a few of the other local brigades. We all did the road crash training together. We all did the hazmat training together. So a few people from each brigade turned up to that. We do our own first aid training simply because, amongst other things, I am a first aid trainer. So we do our own training for that. Also, I run it as a one-day course, as a short course. Doing a first aid course over two days is so mind-numbingly boring for people who have done it before. If you have never, ever done anything like it before, then maybe it needs to be two days. I know that there are moves to make it into the short course because that is the way it should be. We make sure that everybody has the minimum standards. Then it is really up to people what they want to turn up for. If there is demand for it, then we try to get things.

Ms FARMER: John, in terms of the training that is available for fire wardens, what are your comments on that?

Mr Thomson: It is a bit of a hard one, because most of the fire wardens I know have been doing it for years. There are only a couple of new ones, and they should be up to scratch because I train them. It needs to be revamped. There are side issues coming in now like local council laws et cetera which we did not have to worry about 30 or 40 years ago, because we did not have the population that we have now. So there are some things that need to be done, but I do not want to make fire wardens the policemen to be implementing local council by-laws et cetera. If we can stay away from that, it would be appreciated.

In a lot of instances, in 99 per cent of the instances, people have the right to have a fire. They need it to do whatever they want to do. When I give a permit, I look at it from a fire perspective. This person wants to burn whatever it is. They need to do this, this, this and this to make it safe, and I issue the permit on those instructions. That is what I do. People say, 'He should have woodchipped that.' Well, that is up to that person. To me, it is the same as saying, 'You should have voted Labor or you should have voted Greens.' That is up to the individual as to what they want to do on their own property. They come to me and say, 'I want to burn this.' I have a look at it and say, 'Yes, you can burn it. You are entitled to do it.' If it is a couple of barrel loads of rubbish I say, 'Take it to the dump.' But that is the way I look at it. Training for the fire wardens should be improved, I feel.

Ms FARMER: So now how do you provide that input? If you feel like there is some revamping required, who would you talk to about that?

Mr Thomson: I would go and see our director and have a yarn to him. I probably see him every second or third week and we have a talk and so on. We get things worked out that way. Liaising again—that is what it comes down to.

CHAIR: I agree.

Mr Thomson: If you do not talk to people, you do not know. That unfortunately has been a failing of the hierarchical echelons in the RFS. They have not been talking to the people out in the field.

Mrs SMITH: My question is to Julatten. With so much being asked of volunteers, what prompts a person to join an RFB? Where do they come from and why do they leave?

Mr Sausman: That is a good question. I think we are different to the guys on the cane farms where they are basically protecting their livelihood. So there is definitely a difference to that. Some people volunteer because they want to put something back into the community. It sounds a very old-fashioned thing to say but actually some people do do that. I am thinking back because I only joined about three years ago or 2 ½ years ago. I am trying to think why did I join. Partly it was to put something back. Partly it was because I knew some of the people doing that. It is a relatively small community. Everybody knows everybody. If not everybody, then they know somebody who does know everybody. It is still very much a community. Why do people leave? Usually people do not leave. Volunteers leave because they leave the area. I think that is probably true.

Mr Hadley: Yes.

Mr Sausman: I do not think the issue is why do people volunteer, because the people who volunteer are the people who volunteer. They are the people who will always volunteer for something and put something back. There are always those people. The real problem is how do you increase that. How do you get new members in and new, younger members in? I have not got any brilliant ideas on that, I have to say. I think that is the biggest situation facing people. I think the people who have volunteered have volunteered initially to protect their livelihood as farmers. Then it is about the people who volunteer for things and who want to put something back. I think it is down to that. It often is with these things.

Mr RICKUSS: A bit of trouble I can see from your group, Paul, is that people who are experienced with cane fires are only cane farmers. The only people experienced with cane fires are cane farmers. Your group is a little bit different to most of the other groups involved.

Mr Wienert: Yes, very much so.

Mr RICKUSS: That is just an observation more than anything else. That is why your volunteers are different.

Mr Wienert: Yes.

Mrs SMITH: Mike, do you receive any assistance from the Department of Community Safety regarding the recruitment of volunteers?

Mr Sausman: Not that I am aware of.

CHAIR: Paul, what are your views on that? We talked about trying to attract new members.

Mr Rossi: In my area new members are not a common thing. I have had a few join up because they have moved into the area and these farmlet style properties. They are genuinely interested. I have had guys who are up against dry, open woodland eucalypts. Property protection is the reason they have joined as well. Most of the people in the brigade are of that ilk. They are in it for property protection and generally fighting fires.

New members are new people who move into the area. Otherwise there are no new people in the area to join. We are an ageing area. There are a lot fewer families than there used to be in the area working on the farms. That is due to economics and the way things have gone. There is a lot of diversity in this room at the moment within a small area with different brigades. It is hard to put them on the same page. It is difficult thing to do. With cane it is totally different to the conditions in Speewah or Kuranda.

Mr CRANDON: John, we touched on this earlier but can we hone in and get specifics. In your submission to the committee you noted that urban encroachment is having a massive effect on rural fire brigades due to the fact that new residents have very little knowledge about bushfires and are reluctant to use hazard reduction burns. Could you explain to the committee what you think could be done to mitigate this?

Mr Thomson: That is a hard one. We do hazard reduction burns mainly on council land and road verges and roadways. National Parks get us to help them and we do that. They come and help us when we are doing burns also. We cop a lot of flak. People say, 'Why did you blacken that hill?' Maybe if we did not do it and we had the big wildfires and it lasted for 15 years before it burnt and then it took the trees three or four years to recover and there were no possums, no snakes, no lizards and no birds they might understand. But we do not want to go there.

We need to educate people that fire is part of the environment. Fire is a necessary thing for a lot of the eucalypts in our area. Maybe somebody with a little bit of knowledge of human nature can get through to them. We do need fire. We do need hazard reduction burns. We need them at the right time. That is the problem. I really cannot answer your question straight out. I cannot give you a yes or no answer. All I know is that we do need them and we have to continue with them.

Mr CRANDON: Does anyone else have an opinion on that? It is something we need to look into. Someone else might know a bit more about human nature. Does anyone want to make a comment on that?

Mr Sausman: I think society has changed. Without getting really deep about the whole thing, but society has changed and people are less likely to volunteer. People are more disconnected from their environment. People are more disconnected from their communities than they used to be. Although people still live in relatively small communities up here they are becoming more disconnected. People are really only doing things that they get a direct reward for. People are becoming more time poor.

A lot of people are having to hold down two jobs instead of one job because they have trouble making ends meet and things like that. The Far North has been hit quite hard, as you are aware. I think it is a real issue, the education that it is a volunteer brigade, and this is what we do, and getting people to volunteer for it. I think to a great extent it is becoming a social problem.

Mr CRANDON: You are coming back to that volunteer issue again. Are you suggesting that volunteering might bring people around to hazard reduction burns? Is that what you are saying?

Mr Sausman: That is a good question. I do not think so. I think it is the chicken and the egg in terms of that. If you educated people and they understood what was necessary, you might get more volunteers.

Mr Thomson: Can I add to that. I have done the stop, drop and roll program with the grade 1s, 2s and 3s. They go right through school and then they go to university. At that age they are only interested in having a good time and getting an education or getting an education and having a good time, whichever way they are inclined. Then they get married and come out and live in a suburb or an urban area. They are probably 30 or 35 and have a couple of kids. Somebody comes along and wants to burn the backyard. Of course they are against it. I think we need to educate them a lot earlier—that is, in the gap between being seven years old and 30 years old.

There are two plans that are going ahead. One is in South-East Queensland and one up at Cooktown, believe it or not. One of the teachers up there has seven children that she has signed on with the agricultural college in Mareeba as part of their certificate II. They are training as rural fire brigade firefighters. We went up to Cooktown the other day and they put on a bit of show for us. They are excellent. I would have them in my brigade today—no bones about it.

They are interested in not only fighting fires but learning and knowing about fires. Maybe that is something we look at, that is, trying to get grade 10, 11 and 12 students educated in the use of fire and why we do have fire.

Mr CRANDON: Does anyone else want to comment?

Mr Wienert: I would agree with what John said. The only thing I would say to the Julatten guys is that they have cane farms up there; just blame your hazard reduction on them. It works on the coast.

CHAIR: We will come back to the issue of urban sprawl. In your experience, do your local authorities actually talk to the QFRS or the rural fires about potential subdivisions and what that might mean for people like yourselves?

Mr Thomson: Yes, they do in the urban areas. The area director puts out what he thinks. Unfortunately, it is usually planned before they contact them. We have had a couple. I think there was a law passed about seven or eight years ago about having more than one access point into a property. That is still happening up where we are. We have brought it up at our group meetings and hammered the council.

CHAIR: Which council is that?

Mr Thomson: The Tablelands Regional Council. I would hope that it is not going to happen again, but it did happen in two places where I live. There is a way out but it is up over the mountain and it is not a road. You will be able to scamper out of the backyard and over the hill but you will not be able to drive a Cairns

vehicle. That is a problem not only for the firefighters but for the residents, too. They have been warned about it. Luckily, most of them are pretty well on the ball and the place is kept clean. We do not have problems in that area.

Mr RICKUSS: Even in South-East Queensland we have the same problem where estates are developed and there is only one road into it and out of it. If you get a fire on that access road it is pretty hard for people in the back blocks to get out. It is a state-wide issue.

CHAIR: What about the others? Do you have much experience with your councils? Do you get involved with your local authorities?

Mr Sausman: No, I have not. There has not been a lot of development in Julatten.

CHAIR: It is not something that concerns you greatly at this stage?

Mr Hadley: Not at this stage. One of the best things the council did for us is have a minimum of 40-acre blocks. That is good and makes it easier.

CHAIR: Paul, do you have a comment?

Mr Rossi: It is not such a big problem in our brigade area. There are lots of these little farms but there is not a great deal of them. The urban sprawl comes from transient people moving through the farms or kids on motorbikes or people camping around the local creeks. I think in our 2025 plan there is not any scope for urban development. It is just farmland.

CHAIR: Graham, are you happy with that?

Mr Wienert: With the latest town plans there is very little scope in cane lands around the area for any further development outside the Mount Peter urban development zone. There is not really any great impact from that in the future as far as I can see. Most of the impact is on the fringe—that is, urban areas abutting cane land. That is really where the interaction is. There is no real interaction with the council as such as the brigades go. There are issues there as far as the impact of the burn-offs or cane fires go.

CHAIR: I wanted to make sure. I am glad that those discussions are taking place.

Mr RICKUSS: Paul, the Auditor-General found in an audit that the Department of Community Safety does not have a robust and systematic process to identify the level of brigade activity to enable the allocation of resources based on a level of risk and need. What sort of information is provided by local rural fire brigades to the department? When you are doing your cane burns, is that information getting back to the department so they understand how often you are burning off or how often it is needed?

Mr Rossi: Other than the permits being written up by the warden, I do not do an incident record on every cane trash residue burn. I would then be writing out X amount every night. I do fill out incident reports on other call-out fires—that is, whether they are fires that have been lit intentionally or otherwise and whether it is trash or cane. The local dump is a favoured one that goes up a fair bit. It is probably lost.

Mr RICKUSS: At the end of season when you are getting weeks of rain up here have you thought about sitting down and bundling up the permits that you have written for trash fires and sending them in to the office?

Mr Rossi: Maybe Frank does. I am not sure if he does.

Mr RICKUSS: This might assist your tanker issue.

Mr Rossi: You may be right.

Mr RICKUSS: You could say, 'These are the numbers of fires we are having each season. That is why we need these tankers.' It is probably for the cane growers to run across. Is feedback provided to local rural fire brigades about the use that is made of information that they produce for the department? You probably need to discuss with the department a little bit more some of those issues. What is the experience for the Julatten group?

Mr Hadley: For every fire and every call-out we fill out an RF 14 report and send it back to Cairns. That is pretty much it.

Mr RICKUSS: Do you ever sit down in the wet season and have a bit of a look at things and see where your workload is?

Mr Hadley: No, we do not.

Mr RICKUSS: It might be worthwhile to sit down and have a bit of a look at it. You might decide you need different equipment or whatever because the workload is changing. It is surprising when you do that sort of thing what is happening. Do you want to comment on that, John?

Mr Thomson: Yes. I know where our brigade has been and what they have done because as chairman I put in a report each year. Most of our fires have been outside our area. More than half of them were totally outside our group area. As I said, we only had three wildfires in our area. We had seven hazard reduction burns in our area. We had seven fires that we attended in our group area. We had 11 fires that we attended around the place.

We feel that in some instances we are being called because we have a yellow truck that is a four-wheel drive. The thing that does worry me now is that the trucks are getting bigger and there is a tendency to spend money on tankers rather than small manoeuvrable vehicles. We have had the Mitsubishi Canter for 12 years. There will one hell of a fight to get that taken away from us. It is so useful and so

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manoeuvrable. A lot of the boys do not like the Isuzus because they are too big for our environment. They are probably all right somewhere else. For the type of fire that we have got they are a bit big. The tankers are virtually no use to us because they are only two-wheel drive. They have to stay out on the highway or the main road so we can use them.

Mr RICKUSS: May I suggest, John, that you take a little bit of time and you write on them something like 'Needed Canter to get into this fire.' Put that information on your report.

Mr Thomson: Point taken.

Mr RICKUSS: Unless you feed that information back, the blokes sitting at the back of the room probably do not know what is going on.

Ms O'NEILL: This question is in the first instance directed to Julatten. The audit found that there was a lack of an appropriate system to monitor the condition and safety of rural fire brigade equipment. Can you tell us how you monitor the condition of your brigade equipment?

Mr Sausman: Every time it is taken out it is checked. But more than that, we do monthly checks—make sure it is serviced, make sure the tyres are done, all of those basic things. We have a bimonthly meeting and it is usually discussed at that point if there is anything else as well. It is done every time it is used. It is done on a regular basis—usually monthly. If anything else comes up it is discussed at a bimonthly meeting.

Ms O'NEILL: Is that a system or is that just something you do because you know it is sensible?

Mr Sausman: If we find anything that is wrong with them when they are used there is a system in place for that.

Ms O'NEILL: Do you pass that information on to the Department of Community Safety? Would they know whether or not your equipment is in good order?

Mr Sausman: I would have to pass on that one. I am not sure.

Mr Hadley: I would probably say no. We usually leave it up to the first officer. We write a report saying what is wrong with it. That goes to the first officer and he gets it fixed. That is the end of it pretty much. With regard to using the machinery, everybody knows that after a fire call the group of people who went out know that when they come back everything is checked, filled up and is in good nick. If not, it gets fixed straightaway. That is pretty much our system. There is not one person who controls it. Everybody in the brigade is responsible.

Ms O'NEILL: Is that your experience, Paul?

Mr Rossi: We are somewhat different again. Because it is mainly a co-contribution between the member and rural fires, it works differently. Most of our tanker style set-ups are used probably weekly, if not monthly, anyway. They are all in good order. Generally the members will order or change hoses as required. Because we have such a large number, most farmers will have one or two of these 3,000 litre tanks. In 20 or 30 minutes I can have a dozen 3,000 litre tanks turn up. They come from everywhere. It is a different issue there.

Ms O'NEILL: Do you want to say anything, John?

Mr Thomson: We have an equipment officer in the brigade. His job is to make sure the equipment is in good order. It is our job to tell him if anything is not. That is part and parcel of what we do. It is working. We do not have any problems. The vehicle had a flat battery the other day. It was charged immediately so everything is in working order. It is checked. I spoke to him on Saturday night and he was going down to make sure everything was tops today. It is a function that we have.

Ms FARMER: We talked a bit earlier about conflict between the rural and urban fire brigades. We have had quite a few submissions about that, particularly in relation to funding and call-outs. What is your experience there? If you call out an urban appliance so you can protect neighbouring houses, who covers the cost?

Mr Hadley: I do not know. Usually when we get called out we are first there and last to leave. The urbans go home and we are left to clean up. I really could not tell you who pays for it.

CHAIR: What is your experience? What has happened? What do you do now?

Mr Hadley: We had a rollover the other day in Julatten. A soft drink truck rolled over. We got called out last.

CHAIR: This is the yellow truck?

Mr Hadley: Yes, a yellow truck. We have medium attacks. We were called last to that incident. The urbans and the ambulance were all there. We got called out and it was all over by the time we got there. It is one of the biggest issues in Julatten. We made a decision in our unit to be on-road rescue because it could be Mike, it could be my mum or people we know. We are going to stop anyway and do our job. We made a decision to be road accident ready. We can only assist. We can only do so many things. It is up to the urbans to do their job. We are finding that we are not getting called when we should be called. In our area, we should be called just as quick as the urbans. Nine times out of 10 we are going to be there in 10 minutes flat.

CHAIR: So quicker?

Mr Hadley: Quicker. We are up in the hills. You have Mossman, Port Douglas and Mareeba. Mareeba is an hour away. Mossman and Port Douglas would be 20 to 30 minutes away if there is no traffic and no hold-up on the range.

CHAIR: And they are auxiliary stations?

Mr Hadley: Yes.

Mr CRANDON: So is covering the cost not an issue with you?

Ms FARMER: It is actually about the call-out itself. What should be done about that? How do you solve that issue?

Mr Hadley: I do not know.

Mr RICKUSS: Is Firecom the problem?

Mr Hadley: I do not what the answer is.

CHAIR: So if the 000 call goes through that there has been an accident near your area, Firecom would identify the urban station near there; is that right?

Mr Hadley: The closest is Mossman, Port Douglas or Mareeba. It is 70 kilometres to Mareeba from the middle of Julatten.

Ms FARMER: So more localised information needs to come through about what services are available?

Mr RICKUSS: Firecom is not notifying them quickly enough.

CHAIR: I understand that. I am just trying to work out why that would not be the case. I would have thought Firecom would have a list—

Mr Hadley: I cannot talk on behalf of Dave, but he had a call-out the other week and Firecom rang and said it was a courtesy call. There was a car rollover and Dave spoke to Firecom about it. Dave said, 'Do you want us to go or not?' They said, 'It is just a courtesy call. It is up to you.' That was it. I do not know what the outcome was. I do not think we went.

Ms FARMER: Is that the experience for you, Paul?

Mr Rossi: In relation to which part of your question?

Ms FARMER: Fair point. I am interested in the answer. I was not expecting that answer necessarily. In terms of what the Julatten people are saying, you are not called out when you should be?

Mr Rossi: In my experience, we have not been getting a lot of call-outs in the last couple of years that I have noticed. I had a car fire on the edge of the Bruce Highway last year. By the time the urban guys turned up the fire was out and it was all done. Then they turn up and then they go away. I do not know what happens with the cost of the call-out. It just disappears.

CHAIR: You got a call and you turned up with the tractor and the tanker and put the fire out?

Mr Rossi: Put the fire out.

CHAIR: And the urbans turned up after that.

Mr Rossi: They turned up but it was all over. They mop up and do what they have to do.

Mr CRANDON: The initial question was in relation to who covers the cost.

Mr Rossi: We are wearing that.

Mr CRANDON: Is it an issue for you? In the question we were saying that we have received some submissions—

Mr Rossi: It becomes a bit muddy as to who is the volunteer. I would have been working and doing something else. I dropped everything to deal with that.

Mr CRANDON: We are not paying people. We are talking about the cost of the fuel and all of those things.

Mr Rossi: Okay. Where does that stop and start?

Ms FARMER: So it is not clear?

Mr CRANDON: It is not an issue for you guys?

Mr Rossi: It has not been to date.

CHAIR: It not such a regular event. You have a community focus. If someone has been hurt you will get down there straightaway and not think about those issues.

Mr CRANDON: There are not a lot of call-outs. It may be an issue in other areas where there is a significant number of call-outs.

Mr Hadley: Getting back to the answer: the cost to us is not an issue because we collect a levy. Our cost is fuel and that is about it.

Ms FARMER: The way you have been talking about this issue, it seems there is a communication issue. John, do you want to comment on that too? Who should be called and when?

Mr Hadley: In Julatten we do have an issue with that.

Mr Thomson: Sometimes it becomes an issue if you are called out and you drive 50 kilometres and 60 kilometres and then find out the fire is out. That becomes an issue. As far as the cost goes, the area director in our area is absolutely marvellous. If we get called out of our area he has a standing order that you fill up with fuel on the way home. If you are still there when it is tucker time the pizzas arrive and the cool drinks arrive. He looks after his crews and the fuel bill. The cost to us is not a problem.

Mr Sausman: In terms of the communication issue, mobile phones do not work. We do not have phone coverage in Julatten. A lot of us also have six, seven, eight acre properties. During the day, if we are out we are out, even if we are on the property or out at work. We are not contactable on our properties if we are away from the house. That is another communication issue. There is no easy way over that. That could be a reason sometimes that nobody has called. They get down the list of six people and do not get hold of anybody. There could be that as a mitigating factor.

CHAIR: I will pull it up because our time has expired. We will be outside having a coffee if people would like to chat. Are there any further statements or comments you would like to make?

Mr Thomson: I have one issue that is quite important to us—that is, the time it takes to get paid for anything or for accounts to be paid. I have got three that I know of just in our area. We have bought radios and it has taken 8½ months to finally get through the process. It was a grant from the casino here. To my knowledge, it still has not been paid.

CHAIR: Are we talking about the QFRS or a casino grant?

Mr Thomson: We are talking about Kedron, I presume. That it is where it was sent. The other one is for a truck. There is a truck up in Mareeba that has been sitting on the floor and the guy wants to sell the truck and the guys want the truck but he is still waiting to be paid. Then one is for an accident. The insurance has paid but we have always been told that the RFS will pick up what is left over to get the vehicle roadworthy. That has not happened. That was due to fire last year. Things take a long time.

CHAIR: I do not believe there should be any reason why that should be the case, but can you leave that with me for a moment. Do the other gentlemen have anything further to say?

Mr Rossi: I would like to see things remain pretty much the way they have been for us. They have worked well. As you can see, there is a difference with brigades. I would like to see the brigade remain autonomous to some degree. I do not like being grouped into areas where they say Babinda is the same as Doomadgee, which it obviously is not. I would like to see the Rural Fire Service run by rural people rather than morphed into one greater Queensland fire service.

Mr Wienert: I absolutely agree with everything Paul just said. The two big issues are not messing around with the way the fire wardens are working. We are finding they are working very well. The other is making sure that we have access to the equipment that we need.

CHAIR: I think they are all very good comments. I think it has been invaluable for the committee to talk to the people here today. We are certainly available outside to chat further. John, I would like to talk to you after the meeting about those issues. I think we can get those sorted out for you as long as there are not operational concerns behind them or there is something going on that we do not know about. I do not think that is reasonable and we will work through those issues with you.

The time allotted for this particular section has expired. If member have any additional questions we will write to you about those. Thank you for your attendance. It has been a pleasure to be here this afternoon.

Committee adjourned at 5.15 pm